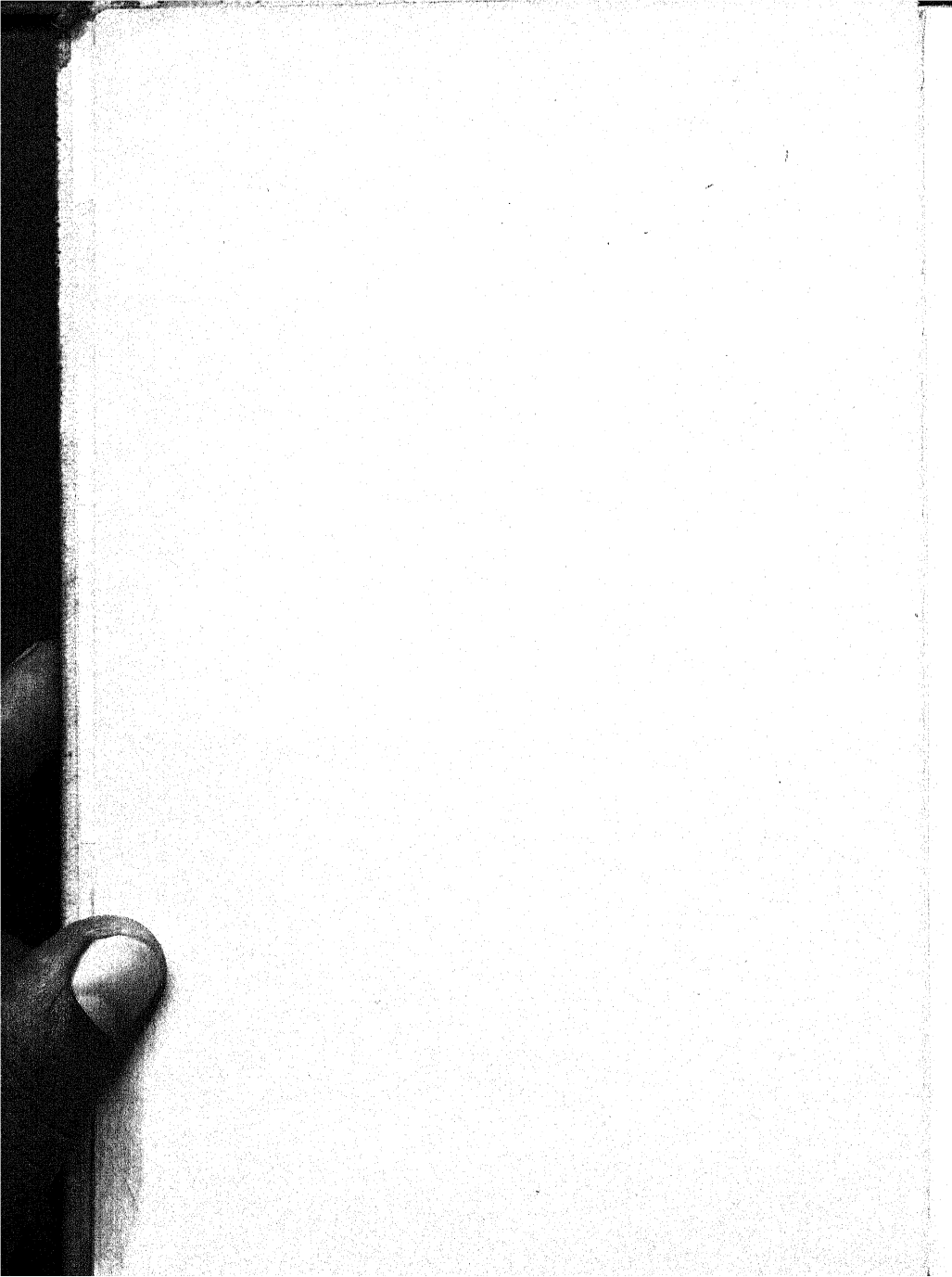


DAREDEVILS OF THE AIR





RUD KNELT DOWN QUICKLY AND RELEASED THE BELT
OF THE UNCONSCIOUS PILOT.

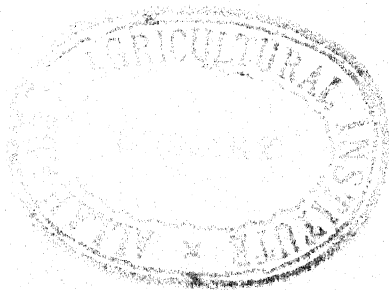
Daredevils of the Air.

Frontispiece (Page 8)

DAREDEVILS OF THE AIR

BY
THOMSON BURTIS

AUTHOR OF
THE REX LEE BOOKS
WING FOR WING
FOUR ACES, ETC.

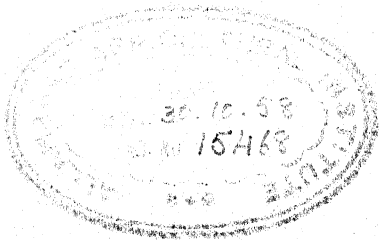


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DAREDEVILS OF THE AIR

CHAPTER I

LORD CHURCHILL

AS FLIGHT LIEUTENANT RUDFORD RILEY, better known as Rud, sent his DeHaviland plane hurtling on its way, it seemed to him that life was a very meritorious invention and that even war had its points. The shell-ravaged terrain below him was proof that all its points were bad, but the pleasantly mysterious orders in the tall young Texan's pocket, for the moment at least, wiped any but pleasant thoughts completely out of his mind.

His slim, wide-shouldered body was sunk low in the cockpit in utter relaxation. Occasionally, he did sweep the sky for signs of a hostile plane, but he was well behind his own lines and those orders in his pocket were such as to make him take every precaution not to get into a dog fight and to reach his destination safely. All he knew was that he was one of a few picked men,

gathering at a certain rendezvous for most special duty. He felt that it was a compliment to him, but the young Texan really had no idea himself that he was already one of the great flyers on the front.

His close-fitting helmet framed a face that was at once deeply tanned and yet had signs of freckles on it. His nose swept boldly forward over a wide mouth, and a lean, square jaw. Blue eyes which glinted with pure zest in life gazed levelly at the world with a look in them which came from much gazing into the far distances of the Texas plains and later on at the limitless vista which the flyer sees. Almost always, a quizzical smile played around his mouth which was half serious and half a persistent self-mockery which was part of him. Rud, except in moments of great stress, never forgot to laugh at himself.

The visibility was far from good, but nevertheless many miles westward his range-trained eyes could identify the blurred mass composed of tortuous trenches, shell holes and barbed wire which was the Allied front line of that stubbornly contested slice of territory which had been soaked with a rain of shell fire since 1914.

His eyes searched the sky absently. Then

suddenly he leaned forward as his gaze froze to an airplane which had just catapulted itself out of a low-hanging cloud. The Texan's eyes narrowed and his muscles seemed to coil themselves as though for a spring. Then he leaned back in utter relaxation as he saw that it was a DeHaviland like his own.

"Wonder what he was playing around in the clouds for," he reflected. "Looks like he was coming up to say 'howdy.' "

Which apparently the other pilot was. He, like Rud, was alone in his two-seated plane, and flying it from the back seat so that he could be close to the single machine gun on its scarf mount around the rear cockpit. Using his extra altitude to go into a dive and overhaul Rud, the unknown pilot ended up barely twenty-five feet in back of the Texan and an equal distance to the right.

Rud waved to him gayly, but the unusually tall airman in the other ship made no response. Inch by inch he crept close to Riley, until finally his left wing was almost in the angle formed by the fuselage and right wing of Riley's plane.

Formation flying was almost an unknown art in April of 1915, and Riley, a natural genius of the air himself, watched the other man admiringly.

"Sure can fly," he thought to himself. "Looks like he wanted to hook his wing right on me."

To the reckless Texan it seemed that tight touch-and-go combination flying was just the interlude necessary to break the monotony of the flight, and he entered into the spirit of it heartily by flying straight and level and giving the other man a chance to do his stuff.

For a moment or two they flew along as though tied together. Then suddenly it seemed as though Rud's plane had been hit a terrific blow from above him. It seemed to drop away beneath him and an instant later his motor coughed and went dead.

Like a flash the startled pilot pulled back on the stick in an instinctive effort to regain his altitude. Then there came a rending crash of tearing linen and splintering wood, and the roar of the other ship's motor rose to a frenzied scream. As though the shock which knocked Riley's plane off an even keel had set his motor at work again, it burst into a roar.

Riley's head snapped around and in a split second he comprehended what had happened. The propeller of the other ship had disappeared except for the jagged hub, and his own right elevator was a wreck.

As tense as drawn wire, the Texan eased

back on the stick and his ship answered heavily. The other elevator was all right, and his control wires had not been damaged.

"Tough bump. Jammed up the carburetor float and he ran into me," he thought swiftly. "What's the matter with him?"

For a moment he sat like a statue in his crippled ship as he watched the other DeHaviland slide off on a wing and start fluttering downward. In the rear cockpit the tall pilot's body had slumped against the cowling. His helmet had been torn and Rud could see the blood gushing from the side of his head.

Rud forgot the condition of his own plane as he spiraled down around the helpless DeHaviland which was dipping and fluttering toward the ground.

"A piece of the propeller got him right in the head," he was thinking. "He's as good as dead now!"

Somehow it was horrible to watch that long tragic descent. The motor had died. Evidently the unconscious airman had had a chance to cut the ignition before he had been knocked out. It would have been less of an ordeal, almost, to watch the ship had it gone into a spin or a nose dive. Floating downward like a crippled bird, sometimes in a half spin, sometimes coming level, only to fall off in a side-

slip and spin again, it was too much like a living thing trying to escape the horrible fate before it.

Three thousand feet, two thousand, a thousand—

Rud handled his own crippled plane with automatic skill and seemed unable to take his eyes from the other ship. He had forgotten even to scan the ground to see what was below them, and in his narrow blue eyes there was a sort of shadow—a bewildered, stricken wonder at the quick blow of fate which had overtaken his unknown companion.

Then suddenly his lips parted and a shout which he could not hear himself escaped him. He saw the other pilot's body move. The man moved weakly as though still only semiconscious, but momentarily. At about five hundred feet above the ground, he brought the ship level.

Rud's eyes scanned the earth quickly. There was a strip barely three hundred feet south of them which had evidently once been a cultivated field which looked as though it would be possible to land on without cracking up. His gaze darted back to the other plane. It was wobbling downward, pointed unsteadily for that field.

"His head isn't clear yet. Probably weak,"

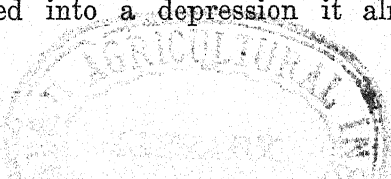
he thought quickly. "Gorry, I hope he makes it!"

It seemed as though Riley was as tense as though he was facing a crisis himself. He was straining forward as though to help the other man. The ship fell off on a wing two hundred feet above the ground and Rud could fairly see his fight for consciousness.

Riley was himself unconsciously gliding for that field. There were some gaunt, half-splintered trees as an obstacle to get over and Rud himself was bringing his D.H. down above them while his eyes remained on the other plane. Then his tan face went white and lines leaped into being around his mouth as he saw the undercarriage of the other D.H. drag through the top of a tree. The nose snapped down and the ship hit the ground on its undercarriage and radiator simultaneously. The tail flipped over like a flash as Rud came to himself and leveled off his own ship.

For a moment he could not look around. He jockeyed his ship, holding it in the air as long as possible for a stall landing on that pitted field. Suddenly it seemed to drop away beneath him and hit the ground heavily, but on three points. It bounced twice and as the wheels dipped into a depression it almost turned over.

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Almost before it came to rest, Rud had torn off his belt and leaped out of his ship. The next second he was running like mad for the wreck a hundred yards away from him. Blue flames were playing over the motor and there was no sign of life beneath the crumpled mass of linen and wood.

There was sheer anguish in the Texan's eyes as he watched the flames leap greedily at the linen. There was a horrible crackling as the ash burned, and to Rud, as his long legs were covering the ground with incredible speed, every second seemed an eternity.

He was gulping great lungfuls of air as he reached the fire. Without hesitating he fairly plowed into the slowly burning mass as his hands tore the smoldering débris away, and he waded through bits of flame.

The unconscious pilot was hanging upside down, like a piece of meat suspended for roasting. His clothes were charred and flames played almost all around him, but none closer than a foot of him.

Eyes reddened and smarting, his lungs tortured by the smoke, but unconscious of pain, Rud knelt down quickly and released the belt of the unconscious pilot. His body dropped, Rud breaking the fall, and the next minute he

was staggering out of the ever-growing fire, dragging his unconscious burden.

Thirty feet away from the fire he dropped the airman's arms and subsided weakly on the ground himself. His breath was coming in great gasps, and his lean face was red as a beet. Suddenly there was a great transition from the snarling, grim-faced man who had fought his way through that fire. It seemed as though every muscle in his body relaxed. His eyes lost the ferocious blaze which had been in them, and his wide mouth settled into its usual expression of half-humorous mockery.

He examined his clothing casually and beat out a few sparks which were eating at it. Slowly he took out a cigarette.

"Well, the monotony has been broken, I should say," he thought to himself. "Better have a look-see at this hombre's head."

It was just a flesh wound, and the blood had partially coagulated into an ugly smear which covered half the side of the other pilot's face. Bud had just finished bandaging it with his handkerchief and had gently lowered the man's head to the ground when the silence was broken.

"Silly ass!"

"Huh?" grunted the surprised Riley, turn-

ing to confront his companion. "So you've come out of dreamland, have you?"

He was looking into a pair of very cool gray eyes. Rud had removed helmet and goggles, revealing closely cropped blond hair, perfectly combed as though the Englishman had just stepped from his bedroom. His long, thin face, garnished by a closely clipped brownish mustache, was quiet and composed as though the incident was an everyday affair for him.

"So I have," the Britisher said. "That was rotten flying on your part."

"The deuce you say!" drawled Rud, danger signals flying in his eyes. "Where do you get license to say anything?"

"Pulling up your ship in a stall isn't being done, old boy, in formation flying," the Englishman told him coolly. "Beastly dangerous, you know. Have you an extra cigarette, by any chance?"

Rud nodded as he passed him one.

Somehow the superior air of the Englishman irritated him more than the precise words, and yet somehow he felt that he ought to control himself. After all, the Limey wasn't exactly himself probably——

"Thanks for pulling me out of the fire, and all that sort of thing," the Englishman said quietly as his eyes flickered toward the bonfire

which had been his ship. "You came out all right, what?"

Rud nodded as he scrutinized the other man with growing interest which seemed to be returned somewhat on the Englishman's part. Rud was a little over six feet, with a pair of wide sloping shoulders which tapered into thin flanks and very long, loose-jointed legs. There was something hawklike about his lean, high cheek boned face—his nose seemed to jut forth in a bold curve and his eyes, with their slightly sloping brows, to be flinging a perpetual challenge to the world. His reddish hair had the effect of being galvanized by the exuberant vitality within him, and a vast zest for life exuded from every pore. There was a subtle touch of devil-may-care recklessness in the expression of his mouth and eyes and his ordinarily slow, relaxed movements added to that expression. It may be said that these features of his make-up were not deceptive.

"By the way, my name is Riley. I'm with the 19th."

"Indeed?" the Englishman said.

Rud's eyes blazed at that unutterably bored retort, and as the Englishman did not go on to identify himself, Rud leaned forward.

"You can get away with this high-and-mighty stuff in your condition, mister, but I've

had enough of it," he said. His speech was deliberate, a space between each two words. "I'm going to load you into that ship and take you along with me, and if I never see you again after that, it'll be too soon. I'm bound for Goncourt, and that's where you're going whether you like it or not."

"I say, don't be excited, old chap," the Englishman told him quietly. "Why are you going to Goncourt, may I ask?"

Something in the utter poise of the gaunt Britisher gave the Texan the idea that he was being laughed at underneath the icy surface of the man before him, and that infuriated him the more, but instinctively he controlled himself.

"Special orders," he drawled, his face very grim.

"Indeed? That's where I'm going, as well."

"Well, then, let's get started," Riley said shortly.

"My name is Churchill—Lord Churchill," the Englishman went on quietly in his clipped, precise way. "I believe I've heard of you."

"Huh?"

For the moment the surprise of the Englishman's name was sufficient to jar Riley out of his sullen resentment. Lying there before him was one of the five leading aces of the

Royal Flying Corps. Rud himself and his observer had credit for three Boche planes, but the Englishman had eighteen already.

Churchill, still reclining on the ground, suddenly felt his pocket. A quick glint came into his emotionless eyes as he said quickly:

"You didn't take any papers out of my pockets, eh, what?"

Riley shook his head.

"Maybe they fell out," he suggested. "Are they important? I'll take a look."

"If you'd be good enough," Churchill said.

So he was ordered to Goncourt, too, Rud was thinking as he retraced his steps toward the ship. It didn't seem to him that the Englishman would be much of an addition to any outfit if his actions of the last few minutes were any indication of his true character.

Within ten feet of the fire he saw a brown packet. It was half open and held what seemed to be a great many papers. Two of them had come half out of it and without thinking he glanced at them. He noticed with slight surprise that they seemed to be a detailed description of gun placements and trench lines and statistics concerning everything from the amount of ammunition to the number of men in various sectors.

"Wonder if that's got anything to do with

what we're going to Goncourt for," he thought. "This guy certainly's got all the dope."

"Here you are," he said, handing them to Churchill.

The Englishman nodded. He took them without a word and put them in his pocket.

"Are you able to walk?" Riley inquired.

And again he nodded. Churchill got to his feet with some difficulty and they walked slowly to the ship. He glanced at the elevator casually.

"I guess she'll hold up," he stated. "And it is important that we get there."

A minute later, Riley, weaving his ship around depressions in the ground with sure skill, was taking off. They made it safely and fifteen minutes later were spiraling down over the landing field of Goncourt, twenty miles behind Ypres.

There were three hangars and from one of them two mechanics emerged. There was but one barrack, apparently, and next to it a small shack. Goncourt was not at present an active station, but an emergency field.

From the smaller building a man in the uniform of a sergeant pilot of the French Air Service emerged and came hurrying toward them.

Churchill got out of the ship without assist-

ance as Riley cut the gun, and he seemed to have regained most of his strength.

"Either one of you Riley or Churchill?" the short stocky officer called to them.

"We're both of 'em," Rud drawled.

"We've been waiting for you. My name's Porter. Canadian, but with the French."

"What's the grand rush?" Riley drawled, but he was conscious of leaping anticipation at what the meaning of such rush might be. Rud Riley's idea of a perfect life was to get himself into one jam after another for the sheer delight of getting out of them again.

"Search me, but there's a major in there with authority to do everything, and he's in a rush to see you. That's all I know."

"I don't know him," Churchill said loftily.

"That's his hard luck," Riley drawled sardonically. This Englishman got his goat.

"Whatever it is, we're all in on it, I guess," Porter stated. He seemed to be literally quivering with eagerness. "What happened to you, Churchill?"

"Bit of a wreck. The lieutenant here picked me up by accident."

"Uh, huh," said Rud. "Don't you know you're supposed to call him milord?"

"Oh, forget that stuff," grinned Porter. "Let's go."

The Englishman was acting as though bored with the whole business and that smoldering resentment within Riley seemed to flame anew. The titled Churchill was like a fish, somehow. As far as Rud was concerned, he had about as attractive a personality as a flounder.

A moment later he was following Porter into the small office building. He wondered whether Porter was the same man who, three days before, had made a secret hundred-mile flight back of the German lines, thereby causing considerable trouble for said Germans. Probably he was, Riley reflected, and he looked like a nice chap to boot. His fleshy face was illumined by a pair of merry brown eyes which belied the businesslike tones of his voice, and the air of strained impatience which was discernible in him. It was as though he was so excited that every moment's delay became an ordeal. He walked in with short, ludicrously important strides and snapped into a crisp salute.

"Churchill and Riley, sir," he said.

Riley saluted automatically as his eyes rested on the man behind the crude table which served as a desk. He was in the uniform of a major of the British army, and his thick black hair was practically white around each temple. It gave an almost startling effect and his dark eyes contrasted with almost equal impressive-

ness with the face which was unusually pallid and thin. He looked like a man who was just recovering from a severe illness. He was smooth faced and his clothing was immaculate. He looked like a wealthy, cultured man-about-town who might be seen in a Piccadilly club or at a first night, and even in his uniform he looked as though he would have fitted better on the general staff than anywhere else. His shoulders were extremely wide and his mouth extremely thin above his square jaw, the cleft in which was made deeper by a scar. That scar was the only thing that marred his exquisite polish, from precisely parted hair to shining boots.

Sitting over at the side of the table was a burly young fellow in the uniform of a flight lieutenant in the British Army. His coarse hair was slightly curly above a broad, fleshy face which was in keeping with the huge torso below. He was not a bad-looking fellow in a ruggedly comely way, but there seemed to be an expression of settled sullenness on his face.

"I'm glad to know you, gentlemen. I'm Major Ashcroft, Army Intelligence. This is my pilot, Lieutenant Gordon. Have chairs."

"I already know Lieutenant Gordon," murmured Churchill, and as the eyes of the two men met there was a half smile of understand-

ing on Gordon's face. Their eyes held quite some time, the curiously uncomfortable Riley noticed, as though they had known each other very well in the past.

"This will take but a moment, Mr. Churchill," Ashcroft said, leaning over his desk and resting his elbows upon it. "You can wait a moment or two to get your wound dressed, I take it?"

"Right-ho."

Riley relaxed into a chair, hunching down into it and throwing one booted leg over the other one.

CHAPTER II

POISON GAS

ASHCROFT's pallid face was like a mask. Those piercing eyes were amazingly alive. It was as though his body was weak but his spirit strong.

"Briefly, gentlemen, you are assembled here on the direction of high authority. For good and sufficient reasons each one of you has been carefully selected for the special duty which this temporary group is to perform within the next twenty-four hours. None of you, however, are under compulsion to accept it.

"I am not only in the Intelligence but am also a photographic expert. Lieutenant Gordon is likewise a technician of high caliber in photographic work. It has frequently happened in the past that special and specialized information that is only obtainable under more dangerous conditions than the ordinary photographic ship could cope with has been a vital necessity. Such information it is my duty to obtain. To make it possible for me to obtain it, you have been selected to accompany me on

certain missions and protect my ship from enemy planes as best you can.

"There are now in one of the hangars here the first six airplanes built for the Allies for the purpose of combat and nothing else. They are single seaters, faster by twenty miles an hour than any other ship, so far as we know, on either side, and for the first time machine guns have been mounted on the cowlings and synchronized with the camshaft of the motor to enable them to shoot through the propeller. To aim your guns, you aim your ship.

"It is our belief that with these ships, and with you gentlemen—especially with you gentlemen—this unit can take care of itself under extraordinarily difficult conditions, at least until such time as the Boche duplicate our ships. The future, however, is indefinite."

The major was talking in level, unhurried tones, articulating with great care, as though choosing his words, and yet there was an effect of irresistible drive in his unhurried, emotionless sentences. His eyes burned as though to lend fire to his thoughts, and the little group of flyers seemed to be half hypnotized by the import of his words.

"The future is of slight importance now. Our immediate assignment is this. Word has come to us that the enemy have made extraor-

dinary preparations for an attack in this sector. I do not mean so much in the line of men and materials, but vague though reliable reports are that they have perfected some new instrument of warfare with which to surprise us. It is our duty to conduct an aerial reconnaissance to-morrow at dawn, take pictures if it seems necessary, and discover, if possible, any evidence there may be behind their lines of what this new instrument of war is.

"There is a concentration of enemy aircraft, as you know, and they will be on the alert, if our information is anywhere near correct, to see to it that no Allied flyers get over to learn anything. Is there any one of you who does not care to accept this type of duty?"

For a moment there was complete silence. Suddenly the blood surged through Riley's body as he found himself afire with anticipation.

"I'd be tickled to death, sir," he drawled deliberately, but his eyes were dancing and the spirit within him could be felt as well as seen. Churchill looked at him with patronizing amusement.

Porter's fleshy, snub-nosed face suddenly expanded in a wide, boyish smile.

"It suits me fine, sir."

His enthusiasm was infectious, but Major

Ashcroft did not unbend even to the extent of a smile. He looked at Churchill inquiringly.

"Of course," murmured the Englishman, as though being required to answer was unnecessary.

"Very well," the major said tersely. "You will each be allowed thirty minutes in the air to get used to your ships. You will eat in the mess hall of the barracks and will be assigned by the sergeant-major to your sleeping quarters for the night. Lieutenant Gordon will be the man to ask for any information you require. That is all, gentlemen."

"Let's see these ships," little Porter said excitedly as they got out of the door. He and Riley half walked, half ran toward the hangars.

Churchill and Gordon walked slowly, talking absorbedly to each other, and acting as though Rud and Porter did not exist.

Two minutes later Riley's shining eyes were surveying the first single-seated combat plane he had ever seen. Fifteen minutes later as he lifted the first one off the ground and felt it fairly leap into the air, it warmed his flyer's soul.

He tried out his guns, pointing toward the ground, and his heart quickened at the accuracy which his Texas-trained eyes and his ex-

perience in handling a ship continued to give him.

For ten minutes he put the little scout through its paces, ending up in a wild burst of aërial fireworks which brought him down to the ground in a series of spins, loops, rolls, and falling leaves.

Porter in his ship did about the same thing and Rud, as he watched the little Canadian come into the field, realized that he was watching the work of a master flyer if there ever was one.

"Deceiving little cuss," he thought to himself.

Churchill merely hopped his plane around the field two or three times and without a word of comment one way or the other departed by a motorcycle side car for a doctor.

The time passed with irritating slowness as afternoon wore into evening and mess time passed. Neither Churchill, Gordon, nor Ashcroft appeared to eat.

"Well," Riley drawled, "Those boys are sure exclusive, aren't they?"

"Oh, forget 'em," said the little Canadian carelessly. "Guess we can amuse ourselves."

And so it came about that Riley found himself in Porter's room at midnight, listening to

an apparently inexhaustible repertoire of songs, accompanied by a skillfully thumped guitar. Porter was like a merry little kewpie as he crooned in his easy tenor voice, and it was hard to think of him as a scourge of the German air service.

"Well, I'm going to take a little walk, get the smoke out of my lungs and turn in. This dawn does come soon," Riley said finally. "How about it?"

"Not me," Porter chuckled. "The little old hay will suit me right now."

"I don't feel as though I'd do much sleeping," Riley remarked from the doorway.

"That's your hard luck."

There was a muffled thunder of guns in the distance and the continuous clatter of trucks from a road perhaps half a mile away. Riley lounged along in the thick darkness, and as he turned the corner from the barracks became aware that there was a dim light in headquarters building. He walked toward it. He wouldn't mind having a few more words with the taciturn Major Ashcroft if they came about gracefully.

That sense of zestful anticipation which had come into being when his orders had arrived had never left him, and as the zero hour approached it seemed to be growing in strength.

He would have been a perfectly happy young man were it not for the resentment against Churchill which gnawed at him despite himself.

He walked up the steps of headquarters very lightly. He wanted to see Major Ashcroft, but he did not want to wake him if he were sleeping.

The outer room was perfectly dark and the door to the inner office was closed, but he heard voices. He stopped in the doorway and suddenly his body tensed slightly and he leaned forward to listen. Someone was talking over the phone. He was talking in German. The guttural syllables struck strangely on Riley's ears for a moment. Then he realized that the voice which uttered them was familiar. It was the voice of the man who had introduced himself a few hours before as a famous British ace—Lord Churchill.

For a full moment he listened to that cryptic conversation. He could not understand what Churchill was saying, but he was evidently giving orders in German, or at least the tone of his voice would indicate that.

There came a click as he hung up the phone, and then Gordon's heavy voice came clearly through the door.

"Everything fixed?"

"Right-ho," answered Churchill. "Well, old chap, dawn is not far away."

"What do you think of this Riley? Troublemaker?"

"Not at all, my dear fellow, not at all. And I told him my name was Lord Churchill. You should have seen his face."

"Knocked him over, eh?" came Gordon's heavy chuckle. "Well, when he finds out the truth he'll have another surprise."

"The jolly old bed for mine," came Churchill's voice, and Riley, his brain a chaos of conflicting thoughts, tiptoed out.

He walked at a fast and furious pace for at least ten minutes as he strove to convince himself that what he had heard was not, could not be of any significance.

Those papers that he had glanced at back at the wreck—what would a flyer be doing carrying detailed maps with written notations all along the sides which apparently constituted a complete résumé of the Allied situation from the number of men to the disposition of the last artillery piece? Giving orders over the phone in German, indicating that he was not Lord Churchill at all—what could it mean? Was he a spy impersonating Lord Churchill, and if so, was Gordon his accomplice? It seemed utterly unbelievable, and yet when he waked from

troubled slumber three hours later it was the first thing in his mind.

"But," he thought as he dressed rapidly, "these must be picked men. Ashcroft called him Churchill. Now, as a matter of fact, probably no one here happens to know Lord Churchill."

Somehow he had grown to hate the superior, poised Englishman, and that was doubtless more than half responsible for the wild ideas which surged through his mind.

Was the outfit to be double-crossed by one of its members? Should he speak to Major Ashcroft about it?

"Time'll tell," he thought to himself grimly as he made for the mess hall.

The others were there before him. Churchill gave him a curt, "Good morning." Gordon nodded surlily and Porter beamed benignly on the world, carrying his food to his mouth via a fork which constantly quivered with his nervous eagerness. Riley ate quickly, and it was as though none of them had any desire for conversation.

From the line there came the subdued drone of the warming motors, and just as Rud was finishing his tea Major Ashcroft appeared in the doorway.

"The cloud layer is fifteen hundred feet

thick," he said crisply, not offering to sit down. "You'll take off at two-minute intervals, rendezvous above the clouds, get into formation, and then you follow me. Coming down from the clouds you will spread, of course, and spin down to make sure we don't run into each other and that as little time as possible is wasted. Outside of that your only duty is to protect my ship. You're not over there to knock down Boche planes unless it's necessary."

Five minutes later Gordon was taking off the two-seated, specially equipped DeHaviland with its unusually powerful motor and careful stream lining. One by one, at two-minute intervals, Riley going last, the ships hurtled themselves into the darkness just as the first tinges of dawn started to lighten it.

The persistent dull boom which a desultory exchange of artillery fire somewhere up at the front caused was drowned by the roar of the motors and as Rud brought his ship darting out into the twilight above the clouds it seemed incongruous to think that there was a war below.

The clouds were like a limitless great wide sea and in the half light a few stars were glowing wanly. It seemed like a dream world. If there were any Germans above the clouds, they were invisible as yet.

Rud wondered how the major was going to hit the precise spot he was after. Then he thought:

"Probably there isn't any special spot. He'll just cruise high, wide, and handsome, seeing what he can see until we have to run for it."

He was relaxed in his seat physically, but spiritually he was as taut as drawn wire as he fell into formation and with throttled motor followed the photographic ship across the clouds.

Thirty minutes passed, and soon the sun would be up. Suddenly the major rocked his ship in the signal to spread.

"These boys can sure fly," Riley thought as the close formation broke up. In every maneuver of the pseudo-Churchill and Porter there was evident the automatic skill of the born airman.

"I'm not going to get far away from this Churchill bozo, either, just in case," he thought to himself as he stalled the little scout and kicked right rudder. The next second it was whirling dizzily downward.

Each one of the four ships was dropping comet-like in a straight course to the earth, and approximately a thousand feet apart. Now the mist was swirling about him as his ship twisted dizzily through it. He was straining his eyes

downward for the first signs of the earth, but it was with an effect of utter surprise that he found himself suddenly catapulted into daylight. Like a flash he shoved the stick forward and jammed on full left rudder. The ground was but fifteen hundred feet below him as his scout swept out of the spin and came level in a long arc.

The major and Gordon were already through the clouds and in the ten seconds during which Riley's eyes searched the sky the others came in sight.

The terrain below gave no particular signs of its being German territory rather than Allied, and it was a network of rutted roads, pitted with shell holes and westward the tangled line of trenches. Five or six miles away there were tiny specks in the sky—Fokkers, doubtless.

Now Rud found himself physically tense, as he, along with the others, fell in behind the major. The major was flying up the lines now in the opposite direction from the Fokkers.

Trucks were rumbling up a long road and there was a large detachment of marching men a mile away. Here and there, as they skimmed over enemy territory, there were signs of wild excitement on the ground.

They passed the ruins of a little town and it

was evidently being used as some species of headquarters. Official cars were there and there were men in German helmets pointing up at them excitedly.

Suddenly the major swung straight for the lines. Obediently the scouts followed him and three minutes later the trenches were in sight. Now from three different points aircraft were rising, but none of them were dangerously close as yet. The audacity of that plunge through the clouds, ending up so close to the ground and so far back of the lines had evidently been a stunning surprise to the Germans below.

Now they were over the trenches and twelve different Fokkers, as nearly as Rud could count, were closing in on them. The closest, a group of three, were less than a mile away. Rud's eyes shifted constantly from his instrument board to the oncoming Fokkers and then to the ground. He saw long lines of steel-helmeted soldiers down there, gun placements, tangled masses of barbed wire.

"What's he doing?"

The major was swinging right down the trenches. They were being shot at now by ground guns and scarcely two miles ahead of them, almost underneath a group of seven Fokkers, the transfigured Texan saw signs of great activity on the ground. What seemed like

clouds of thin, greenish smoke were rolling from the German lines, blown by the wind toward those of the Allies.

Their course was now taking them squarely toward the seven Fokkers who were aware of their pursuit. His throttle was all the way ahead now, and the motors of the Allied ships were wide open as they roared down over their enemies. For a second Rud forgot what the Fokkers meant as his eyes froze to the ground. He saw huge cylinders, long serried ranks of them lying on the ground some distance behind the very front-line trenches, and there seemed to be pipes attached to every third or fourth one of them which led up to the trenches. It was from the mouths of these pipes that the smoke was coming.

"Poison gas!" he thought.

The memory of a thousand casual conversations during that year of war swept back to his mind. The possibility had been suggested time and time again and now it was being used. His heart seemed to stop as he thought of those helpless men toward whom that cloud was rolling.

"The major's got it!" he shouted aloud as the major's DeHaviland banked quickly and started for the Allied lines.

Rud was unconscious of the fire from the

ground guns as he quickly sized up the situation. Those seven Fokkers were not a mile away and were headed to cut them off. Ahead of them, almost over No Man's Land, a formation of three other Fokkers were grimly waiting to strike across their path. Two miles away in the rear two more were roaring up like hungry wolves that have sighted their prey.

"Got to fight for it." Riley thought, and suddenly his lips were snarling and his eyes ablaze with that mad light which had been in them when he had been tearing through that burning wreck to save Churchill.

The Fokkers were within a few feet of the clouds, taking advantage of every bit of altitude possible. Rud was sending his own scout higher, as were Churchill and Porter. The major was five hundred feet below them as the three Allied scouts flung themselves at the enemy.

Rud was the first to start shooting. The Fokkers were the standard monoplane, but they had only rear seat guns. Riley picked the Fokker closest to him on the right and as they came toward each other head-on, his fingers pressed the gun control and a hail of lead poured into the radiator and prop of the other ship. It started downward immediately, its

prop a splintered wreck, just as Riley flung his scout into a vertical bank to pour bullets into the side of the Fokker which was engaged with Porter.

He only could get in a brief burst before the Fokker was out of range, and then suddenly it seemed as though the sky was full of them as the formation of seven joined the battle. It became an aerial riot in which clear thinking or planned action became impossible. The roar of the motors seemed to shake the universe, and as he swung his scout around like a maddened animal, the scream of the wires was a devil's song in his ears. Not for one second did he stay on an even keel or on a straight course. Boche ships passed his sides continuously and from the muzzles of his guns an almost ceaseless fire sprayed out at the Fokkers. Diving, zooming, backing like a trapped animal surrounded by its enemies, Rud forgot Churchill, forgot Porter, forgot everything except those gray hornets which swarmed about him.

He saw one go down in flames and another to a forced landing. Then, in a moment's respite as a zoom carried him into the clouds, he leveled his ship for a second and drew a long breath.

"The major must be safe home. No, maybe they're chasing him," he thought incoherently

as he pushed forward on the stick and brought his scout screaming back to the battle.

As his Nieuport hurled itself out of the shielding mist, it seemed that every quality in Riley had attained miraculous efficiency. In a split second his eyes took in the scene below and beyond him, and his brain seemed to comprehend its significance in every detail as he saw what was happening.

Out beyond the German trenches was the DeHaviland of Ashcroft and Gordon, fighting off two enemies, and it seemed for the moment, successfully, largely because of those front seat guns to help out the free-swinging Lewises in the rear. Working his way toward the major and home, fighting furiously at every step, was little Porter.

The ground below was dotted with six Fokkers, four of them wrecks and the other two apparently down as the result of forced landings. The cloud of smoke was drifting lazily toward the Allied trenches and a barrage was being laid to prevent any action from behind the Allied lines.

Porter was flying like a madman, as he twisted his ship around the Fokkers, which needed to get into a position where their rear guns would be effective and seemed to have the worst of it. They could not maneuver as the

scout could, and with blazing eyes Riley saw Porter, as two Fokkers drew into position for a rear seat shot, get in a burst at one of them which knocked it down, and then turn to come head-on toward the second one before the rear seat men could get in their shots.

Ahead of Riley, as he hurtled out of the clouds, were two German ships hurrying to assist their brethren who were after Porter and Ashcroft. Porter was fighting his way upward toward the clouds now, Riley saw, but Ashcroft in the D.H. had lost too much altitude to make the clouds a possible haven for him.

The Texan, as always in moments of stress, had been turned into an aërial maniac, his face twisted into an expression of utter ferocity and his eyes blazing with a light akin to madness. As he sent his ship toward the nearest two Fokkers, his eyes left them momentarily to look off into the distance. A ship was just disappearing into the clouds at least a mile beyond the D.H. and that ship was Churchill's.

"Running away, the coward," he raged. He never stopped to consider whether Churchill's guns might have jammed, or not. The evidence was in. He had not stopped to protect the DeHaviland or anything else. He had run while the running was good.

One Fokker noticed him as he roared into

action and banked abruptly to give the rear seat guns a chance, but it was too late. The Nieuport's nose was pointed squarely at it and Riley raked it fore and aft with a withering fire. He did not even wait to see what happened to it. As he threw his Nieuport into a vertical bank, he pressed the stick forward and it shot downward only to curve up under the tail of the second Fokker. The Fokker was helpless until it turned because he was at a blind angle from it, and he zoomed up underneath it until the Nieuport was almost standing on its tail, and he was shooting upward at it. His tracers poured into its front section, and then he straightened out just in time to save his scout from stalling.

Somehow he felt as though he and that unique ship which seemed a part of him were capable of anything. In comparison to the F.B. 12's and the D.H. 2's which he had been used to flying, the scout seemed like a high-powered rifle contrasted to a popgun. It answered every whim, as though it knew what his mind was thinking, and it was no surprise to him to see the two Fokkers flutter downward.

There was wild activity below him, but he scarcely noticed it. Those long lines of sinister cylinders were like so many deadly animals waiting to attack below. Trucks, marching

men, guns laying down that pitiless barrage, it was the machinery of death working at its highest efficiency.

Porter was disappearing into the clouds and two remaining Fokkers followed him. Another Fokker was down. Major Ashcroft and Gordon had got it, and it seemed to Riley as though the D.H. was almost over the Allied lines now. It appeared to be gliding down slowly, as though partially crippled. He was left alone——

“And without ammunition, too,” he thought as he suddenly came out of that red-tinted haze and became aware of his own position. “Me for the clouds.”

There were two other ships coming toward him a half mile away, but he was safely in the screening mist before they could reach him. He did not bother to get above the clouds but stayed in them so close to their lower layer that he could partially see the ground at times. He thought nothing of a possible collision with the three other ships in them. His overwrought brain was busy with only two things. One was Churchill whom he thought of as the traitor. The other one was those helpless French and Africans in that sector toward which that menacing cloud of smoke was rolling.

The Canadians, farther west, apparently would escape it. There should be something to do about it, and yet he knew that there was nothing. He was cursing steadily as though to relieve the spiritual torture which was worse than physical pain would have been.

He came down out of the clouds for a moment to get his location. He was over the Allied lines and subconsciously he noticed that the D.H. had come down safely four miles behind them. Then to his left he saw the first agonies of the Allied men in that sector. They were on the ground in swarms as that cloud started to roll over them with horrible sluggishness, and there were hot tears in his eyes as he discerned what was happening. It was gas. Could it be that the Germans had masks of some kind which they could wear and use that opening to attack through?

He sent his bullet-ridden scout into a power dive, losing altitude gradually as it shot toward the airdrome faster than Rud had ever traveled in the air before. He was leaning forward tensely as though to help his ship along, and yet the reason for his wild desire for haste he could not have told himself. Churchill, confound him! Had he been the reason for that cloud of Fokkers which had surrounded them? Ordinarily a part of the German ships would

have been above the clouds, as it would be natural for any attacking Allied planes to use them as a screen. They were waiting down below——

The airdrome was in sight now. Shells were bursting between it and the lines, and it seemed as he scanned the ground for miles on either side that the news of the gas attack must have spread like wildfire. Perhaps it was his mental condition, but it seemed as though as far as the eye could see every living thing was moving faster, and that the entire Allied front was in a panic.

Down in the airdrome he could see a two-seated ship, probably the one in which Porter had arrived, being warmed up. What was the reason for that? He wondered, as he sent his Nieuport darting for the airdrome. There was Churchill's scout, apparently unharmed, on the ground, and Churchill himself was standing beside the two-seater, apparently haranguing a man alongside him.

"He's going to take off again. Maybe to escape," Rud thought, as he brought the Nieuport down across the fence. "What about Gordon, I wonder?"

Well, maybe that spy stuff wasn't true, but Churchill had run away from that fight. If there had been a jam, he could have gone into

the clouds and sought to correct it. He was going to see what was what in just one minute.

With rudder and stick he turned his ship on the ground almost as soon as he had landed and was taxiing swiftly toward the line. The tall Englishman was walking over to meet him, the two-seated ship still idling. Riley, six feet one of flame and steel, threw himself out of the cockpit and walked swiftly toward the oncoming Churchill.

"Ran away, did you?" he raved. "And maybe you'll explain about that conversation in German you had last night, too. You're not going anywhere, understand, until a few things are explained."

"Just the man I want," Churchill interrupted with a sort of glacial calm, but his light gray-green eyes were glinting like sunshine on ice. Something in the very calm of those words dammed the flow of Riley's rushing speech.

"What do you mean?" he stammered.

"Those Boche may have a means of attacking. They should be stopped, you know. And it needs accurate shooting and two men to get away with it."

"Well, what about it? What can we do? Got something else up your sleeve, have you? Well, I want to know——"

"Control yourself, old fellow."

In terse, clipped sentences, uttered without one touch of emotion or the slightest indication that he was under a strain, the horse-faced Englishman outlined his plan.

"O.K.," Riley fairly shouted. "I'll fly——"

"Now, don't get excited. Listen."

Succinctly and coolly he gave Rud his orders, and it never occurred to Rud to wonder why he said, "Yes, sir," when the glacial Britisher finished.

A moment later the two-seater was taking off. On up into the clouds it went, and then watching his compass like a hawk, Rud flew it through the clouds. That twenty-minute flight, while it seemed endless, nevertheless had a curious effect on his frayed nerves and overstrained brain. A transcendent calm descended on him as he dared to come down until he could see the ground through the thin streamers of mist and orient himself, and he was no longer a raging wildcat who acted instinctively, but a much more deadly weapon of the Allies than he had been before.

He had hit the spot almost perfectly. Whether there were Fokkers below, he did not know and scarcely cared. He pointed his ship westward, his position accurately known because of that village he had noticed before down below, and looked around at Churchill.

Churchill nodded, gesturing slightly. The next second the plane was roaring downward in a full power dive. A quarter of a mile ahead of it were the first of those cylinders, extending in serried ranks for at least a quarter of a mile. The course of his ship was parallel to them, and he got it into position which would carry it along that line of cylinders probably fifty yards back of them.

Not a Fokker was in the sky. Yes, just as they started their dive two came hurtling out of the clouds, but a considerable distance from them.

As the ship reached a point fifty feet above the ground and a hundred yards from the first of the gas cylinders it was going so fast that the air blast scarcely permitted Rud to look over the side. It whirled around into his cockpit and almost tore the breath from his nostrils, and the ship was vibrating so terrifically that it seemed as though it could not stand the strain. He leveled it, traveling like a huge projectile and the icy Churchill in the back seat started to fire.

All the skill which was Riley's was poured into the task of keeping the darting ship absolutely level and on an absolutely straight course. A continuous shower of bullets raked that line of gas cylinders. The men who had

been in charge of attaching the pipes to them went down like flies. More important than that streams of vapor poured from many of the cylinders as the ship darted up the line.

They were being shot at from the ground, those two Fokkers were diving toward them, but Rud, his eyes wide as though seeing a vision, gave no heed to any of it.

It seemed but a few seconds until they had darted past the last of the cylinders and now that favoring wind was driving the deadly vapor over the German troops toward the front-line trenches.

Motor wide open, using his excess speed to zoom, he started climbing. Churchill was methodically shooting at the oncoming Fokkers, but they were still a little too far away for effective marksmanship.

They gained six hundred feet in that zoom and the clouds were but eight or nine hundred feet higher. Climbing desperately, Rud made it just as Fokker bullets tore through his left wings and tail.

He took one last look back at the ground. The Germans were in a panic. There could be no attack from that desolated sector.

Twenty-five minutes later they had landed at the airdrome. The reaction of that terrific morning swept over Rud in a wave as he got

out of the ship, and he almost fell. Mechanics were walking toward them, and Porter had appeared on the steps of Headquarters.

"Jolly good stunt, don't you think?" Churchill remarked casually as he got out.

Rud nodded, leaning against the ship as he lit a cigarette.

"Sorry I went haywire before," he said carefully, "but I overheard you saying you were not Lord Churchill, and then you ran away from the fight, and I'd heard you talking to somebody in German—why was that?"

"I don't care to say. Rather my business, don't you think?"

"And those papers, too—well, anyway, it doesn't make any difference now. If you're not Lord Churchill, why did you say you were, and who are you?"

"I like to see Yankees impressed by a title," was the equable reply, with that effect of buried amusement very obvious. "Churchill was supposed to come on this duty but got cracked up a bit yesterday morning. I'm Fitz-Carson. No one knew me but Gordon, and I gave him the wink, as it were, for some silly reason. I thought it would be jolly to sit around and have the laugh on you fellows—might hear something interesting about Fitz-Carson, you know."

Riley's lower jaw dropped. Lord Churchill was the fourth ranking ace at the moment, but Fitz-Carson was ranked first. Little known as a person, nerveless, cold as ice, the lone wolf of the Royal Flying Corps. It was the Englishman's queer, ironic sense of humor that had caused him to hide his identity.

As though he didn't want the subject continued, Churchill went on:

"I understand that our next job is over in the Dardanelles. Rum go, what?"

"Pretty swell, I think," Rud said absently, although his heart leaped within him at the thought of far places and possible new adventures.

"Too far from Paris," Churchill said casually. "Well, I guess we've said our pieces, eh, what?"

Suddenly the impulsive Riley thrust out his hand.

"I'm sorry," he drawled. "Shake on that."

"Of course, but don't be dramatic."

CHAPTER III

A MYSTERIOUS ENEMY

CHURCHILL's information had been correct. It wasn't many weeks later and far away from the Western Front, when Rud Riley entered a little building on the edge of the sea leisurely. As he lounged in the door, he found the four other members of the group which had already been labeled, half seriously, half humorously, "The Phantom Five," awaiting him.

The lean Texan had to think twice to remember that he was on the island of Lemnos, temporary naval base of the Allied Fleet. It was a far cry from the Western Front, but a pleasant change as far as the Southerner was concerned. The lazy Mediterranean air generated a far more comfortable feeling in his bones than the climate of France, which had been more raw than usual in the spring of 1915.

"I wonder how long it's going to take you to learn to be on time," came Gordon's gruff voice.

The huge pilot, his coarse hair making him look like a sort of shaggy, rugged, comely bear

of a man, was seated on the edge of the table behind which Major Ashcroft was sitting. His heavy face with its bulldog jaw and bushy black eyebrows was even more sullen than usual, and his turbulent black eyes rested on the red-headed Riley with an antagonism even more obvious than the spirit which Riley had felt in the man for the past few days.

A quick, cold flame leaped into Rud's blue-gray eyes as he glanced down at his watch, but he was learning every day to control himself more thoroughly.

"I'm exactly three minutes late by this ticker of mine," he drawled, "and if it was thirty minutes, I don't recognize your right to bawl me out."

Fitz-Carson, tall and horse-faced and bored, raised his heavy eyelids slowly.

"Sit down," he said in his customary clipped toneless phrases. "This is no time for a row."

Fat, pug-nosed little Porter's face expanded in a boyish grin.

"Looks to me like it is," he chuckled, "but not between ourselves."

"We'll settle that later," Gordon growled, getting to his feet. "What's up, Major?"

Major Ashcroft glanced up from some maps he had been perusing as though unconscious of the presence of the others. Every time Riley

looked at the C.O. of the little group of Allied airmen on special duty, he found his interest in the man increasing daily. It was not so much his remarkable appearance, although coal black hair which was almost snow white over his temples and a face so pallid that it was death-like were impressive enough. It was something deeper than that. There was a burning spirit inside Major Ashcroft, and his body seemed like a container through which the inner flame of the man never penetrated. Quiet, contained and sure of himself, the major seemed to be a species of fanatic to whom fear, friendship, and all ordinary emotions of life meant nothing, and never in Riley's life had he run across a man of such desperate courage.

The young Texan had become curiously uncomfortable during the few weeks he had been under Major Ashcroft's orders. Sometimes he felt as though he was following a madman straight into the jaws of death, and that Major Ashcroft, certain of where he himself was bound, took it for granted that his subordinates would go the same way with as little compunction as he himself.

"This does not affect you all," he said quietly, his eyes burning like two torches in his livid face, "but it is necessary for you to know the exact situation in case the first expedition

should fail. You are doubtless aware of the fact that as matters stand, with Turkey throwing in its lot with the Central Powers, Russia is cut off completely from us. Our war supplies cannot reach her, her products cannot reach us. It is a matter of desperate necessity, as matters stand, to open up a path from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea which involves the storming of the Dardanelles and the capture of Constantinople. This would be a body blow to the enemy entirely aside from the advantage accruing to us to have a free pathway to Russia. Consequently the operation scheduled for to-morrow, while a desperate one, is strategically excusable because of the great importance of what is at stake, and it must not fail if it is humanly possible to prevent it."

His elbows were on the table and his hands clasped so tightly that the knuckles were white. He was like a statue, utterly motionless except for the movement of his lips, and yet his eyes were sources of power which crackled forth to galvanize the younger airmen before him.

"Consequently my photographic ship, escorted by only one of the scouts, will be at the tip of the Gallipoli Peninsula at dawn to-morrow and inspect the cliffs on either side of the

straits, taking such photographs as may be necessary in order to verify rumors of hidden gun placements and possibly other hidden means of defense which at present we do not know about.

"The mine sweepers are already at work cleaning out the hidden fences in the straits, but after we have explored the cliffs we will go to the Sea of Marmora in an endeavor to discover whether there are any preparations being made there. It is the belief of the admiral that possibly——"

He ceased abruptly. Rud had been in a trance as he concentrated on the incisive words of the major, but suddenly he realized that for the last two minutes he had been subconsciously aware of a far-away buzzing drone which had been coming gradually lower. Now it seemed that it had suddenly grown into a roar.

It was a bright moonlight night, and with one accord the assembled pilots leaped for the door. Riley's rangy body seemed to come up-right as though dozens of springs had been released. He moved with the speed of a striking rattlesnake and was at the door almost before the other men had made a move.

A thousand feet high, coming down in a steep

dive, there was the black cross of an airplane. No details were discernible. It was merely a black smudge against the sky.

They watched it silently as it suddenly zoomed upward and flew straight toward the Dardanelles.

"The Johnny we heard last night," Fitz-Carson, leading British ace of the war up to that time, said in bored tones.

"What do you make of that, Watson?" little Porter chortled to Rud.

"It probably means that despite our precautions they are aware of the fact that we and our airplanes are here," Major Ashcroft said tersely. "We knew that many German officers were instructing the Turkish troops, but I did not know that German flyers were in the vicinity."

"Which will make to-morrow even more interesting," stated Porter with apparent relish. "I've been thinking about what would happen if there was a forced landing. Don't know but that I'd rather be shot nice and clean in the air than I would come down among the Turks at that."

The airplane had disappeared now and silently they filed into the room again. Riley was curiously uncomfortable. Somehow he didn't hit it off particularly well with his companions.

Fitz-Carson, a tall, bony glacier of a man, with as much warmth and geniality as a fish, spent his time almost entirely with the taciturn, sullen Gordon. Porter was a cuckoo kid, and Major Ashcroft a man of mystery who lived entirely to himself and seemed unaware that any other person in the world existed. Rud had a queer feeling that he was resented by Fitz-Carson and Gordon, and he could not fathom it. Few men know themselves to any degree of thoroughness, and the Texan could not know that his easy self-confidence and unconscious refusal to look upon any other living human as fundamentally superior to himself might grate on the nerves of the Englishmen. To them he was a wild Yankee, whose war record, brilliant as it was, was nevertheless no reason for his inclusion in that picked flying squadron which was half aërial secret service and half a carefully welded projectile designed for deadly use at crucial times.

"Now why should that bozo come easing over here in the dead of night, regardless of what they know, or what they've got over there?" Rud drawled half to himself. "Sort of tipping their hand, it seems to me, and useless all around."

"Whatever 'tipping their hand' may mean," Gordon said morosely, glancing at Riley under

his heavy brows. "Let's listen to the major."

Riley's bronze face reddened. He might as well have it out with Gordon. Somehow he couldn't get Gordon's position in the organization set in his mind. He was Ashcroft's pilot on the two-seated photographic ship, but aside from that his record was a closed book. Fitz-Carson's was an open one, its pages covered with glorious achievements. Porter was one of the wildest and luckiest pilots on the Western Front. Their selection for the almost unprecedented flying squadron was easy to understand, as was his own, but Gordon——

"Whatever conditions may be does not alter what we have to do," Ashcroft resumed quietly, as though nothing had happened. "We anticipated aerial reconnaissance after we reached the Straits of Marmora, but we had hoped to take them by surprise as far as aircraft were concerned.

"The photographic ship and one guardian scout will swing up the peninsula, over the Sea of Marmora and back, signaling anything of interest we may learn to the flagship, developing the plates, then back here for additional information. The other two scouts will remain here on the alert in the event that the first expedition fails.

"It is vital, in view of the vague information

we have, that the reconnaissance be conducted with unusual thoroughness. The task laid our fleet is heavy enough, and should there be any hidden resources for defense, they must be known. The stake, as I have stated, is all-important.

"Lieutenant Riley, you will be prepared to take off one hour before dawn to-morrow, accompanying Lieutenant Gordon and myself."

"What?"

It was a bull-like roar from Gordon. His black eyes seemed to snap wide open and he looked at the contained Ashcroft with a mixture of utter bewilderment and hot fury in his face.

"Oh, listen, Major, let me go," Porter cut in, leaping to his feet. "Why give Riley all the breaks? Am I a cripple, or something?"

The fat little flyer cherished the firm belief that he was the best pilot in the world, and frequently stated that fact. His naïve bragging went on seventy-five per cent of the time, and only two things saved him, as far as Rud was concerned, from some pointed remarks. One was that he was so boyish about it, and the second one was that Rud wasn't sure Porter's opinion of himself was not entirely correct. He was a genius in the air.

"Keep still," rasped Gordon to the eager

Porter, and his eyes never left Ashcroft. "Major, do you mean to say that Riley is our escort?"

"Exactly."

"I thought it was all arranged that it was to be Fitz-Carson," Gordon said slowly, and the words seemed to be half snarled.

"I changed my mind."

So Gordon had been in on it before this conference, Riley thought swiftly. It had been arranged for Fitz-Carson, and he knew it.

Gordon leaned across the table, his heavy face flushed and his huge shoulders hunched forward as his clenched fist thudded against the table.

"I insist that it be Fitz-Carson. He is best from every angle!"

For the moment Riley was too amazed at this flouting of Major Ashcroft's authority to grasp the inference of Gordon's words.

"In this particular matter, Lieutenant Gordon, I shall use my own judgment," Ashcroft said steadily, and it seemed as though his face was whiter than ever, if that were possible.

For a moment the two men fought a battle of eyes. Tension lay heavily in the air and the silence seemed pregnant with dark emotions which poisoned it.

"I say, Arch! That's enough, what?" came Fitz-Carson's untroubled voice.

Gordon relaxed suddenly, but the look he shot at Riley held no friendship in it.

"That's no job for kids," he said slowly, as though articulating his words with difficulty.

"You don't say!" drawled Riley, and there was thunder and lightning in his suddenly narrow eyes. The customary mockery discernible in his hawk-like face had turned to a sort of saturnine enmity, and there was menace in his widely spaced words. "Strikes me as though the health of this outfit would be a lot better if I took you out and kicked the tar out of you one of these days, Mr. High-and-Mighty Gordon."

The Gargantuan pilot stood motionless alongside the table, his fists clenched tightly as though fighting for control. It was unusual to see the ordinarily silent, darkly brooding airman under the stress of emotion. It was as though he had won a fight with himself when he finally turned away.

Ashcroft seemed to be suffering somehow, and Riley, divided between a sort of cold fury at Gordon's implied insults to his ability and a hopeless bewilderment at the situation, found himself unable to break that unpleasant silence.

Little Porter was utterly astounded, but Fitz-Carson, blowing smoke rings toward the ceiling, was as cool as an iceberg. Suddenly Gordon walked toward the door.

"My apologies, major," he said carefully. "Is that all?"

The major never moved nor changed his expression, but it was as though he was much relieved as he said levelly: "That is all."

Riley got no sleep whatever that night. He spent most of it tramping up and down the beach, hatless, and with his shirt open at the neck to let the warm breeze cool him. The impression given to the world by his slow Texas drawl and the customary effect of utter physical relaxation, except in moments of extreme stress, was somewhat deceptive. A temper which had been the cause of a thousand battles, some of them almost resulting in tragedy back in Texas, still was part of his make-up, although he tried to keep it under iron control. Along with the devil-may-care recklessness which was mirrored in every line of his aquiline face, there was a strong admixture of boyishness, and the young Texan was far more sensitive beneath the surface than the world in general gave him credit for being.

Somewhere from the very moment when he had been called upon as one of the men to

form that tiny special duty squadron, he had been uncomfortable with his fellows. Porter meant little one way or the other, as far as he was concerned, but sometimes it seemed to him that those damned Englishmen, Fitz-Carson, Gordon, and Ashcroft, formed a closed corporation and that he was an outside pawn in the game who always got the worst of it. They seemed to gang up against him. There appeared to be a thousand points of friction, and at the moment he could not see where he was responsible for any one of them. He was treated like a child, he thought resentfully.

"All right to fly their ships into suicide," he raged to himself, "and little things like that. Get myself all shot up, while they get by without a scratch, and all the rest of it——"

Suddenly he came to himself. He was acting like a child. Nevertheless there was poison somewhere in that little group which shouldn't be there. He remembered the time he had thought both Gordon and Fitz-Carson were German spies because he had caught them talking in German over the phone. He never had got to the bottom of that, either.

That was another thing. He wasn't supposed to rate an explanation for any of the extraordinary things that were happening all the time. He was thinking calmly now, and

he realized that the mobile outfit, used constantly for unusually important, and in the majority of cases, extraordinarily perilous duty, was usually sent into action because of particular circumstances. It was perfectly natural that Major Ashcroft should be constantly in possession of information which his subordinates could not, and should not, have. Somehow, Riley felt, though, that Fitz-Carson and Gordon did have it, and that he was just an inhuman link in the chain, a tail to the dog which would be used until he was knocked off, rating as little respect, confidence, or intimacy as one of the new special scout planes which the outfit were using.

"Well, I can take care of myself," he thought finally, but as his thoughts veered to the flight which was now but an hour away, he was always fully aware of that resentment which was within him.

If he knew the mysterious Major Ashcroft at all, he knew that there was more behind that trip than had been indicated. Probably no other man but he would attempt it, if the truth were known, Rud thought.

"That's one thing I've got to give credit to Gordon for, anyway. He's got guts enough to fly a man who doesn't think his life is worth a nickel. Ashcroft would send that ship right

into the mouth of some new gun to take a photograph of its projectile."

He wondered what the significance of that mysterious airplane which had made its second visit to the island that night might be.

"You can't tell me a German would be doing that crazy stunt," he thought to himself. "Comes over for no reason and then flies away again. Comes low so we'd be sure to know what was happening. Maybe one plane is all they've got handy, and they're notifying us that if we really have got planes here, they'd better stay on the ground, or be shot down."

Porter's casual remark about his preference for being knocked down in the air rather than coming down among the Turks occurred to him. The flight ahead was no huckleberry, he reflected. The territory was all rough and rugged and wooded, and the chances were that the Turks might not arrange such pleasant conditions for a captive. If a forced landing should come along, which was far from unlikely, it looked to Rud as though the water would be the best bet, from what little he knew of the country. They should have seaplanes; still, their little Nieuport scouts were the one factor which had brought the Phantom Five out of battles in which they had been outnumbered three to one.

"And I've got a hunch we'll need 'em tomorrow," Rud thought, as he started for the building in which their planes were concealed. "I don't know but that I'd rather be up than I would be on those eighteen ships that are going to shoot up that channel. The major isn't going over there just on a hunch. He knows something and he's worried, and if he's worried, it's a cinch that the big bugs aboard the fleet are looking forward to the trip being no pineapple."

He found the mechanics making preparations to warm up his scout and the two-seated, specially built DeHaviland which would be used by Gordon and the major.

The air was quiet and sultry, and occasionally a sort of booming undertone reverberated across the water to indicate that over at the Dardanelles peace and quiet scarcely reigned.

As the ships trundled out Major Ashcroft and Gordon came walking through the thick gloom.

"That's the funniest thing I ever heard of. It's a wonder he didn't shoot us up," Gordon said in his heavy, rumbling bass.

"Highly peculiar," stated the major, his face showing very white through the darkness.

"What's up, sir?" Riley asked. He was like

a race horse, growing more and more taut as the time for action came.

"A Fokker monoplane shot up the decks of three ships over in the straits," Major Ashcroft said quietly. "Undoubtedly the one which has flown over us the last two nights."

"That's a funny way to act," Riley said softly.

"It must be an individual and not a military pilot flying under orders," the major said quietly. "Are you ready, Lieutenant Riley?"

Rud nodded as the motors burst into full cry, the mechanics bending low in the cockpits to scan the instruments.

CHAPTER IV

FLOATING MINES

FIVE minutes later, like two monsters of the night, the ships were roaring across the tranquil sea, going ever higher in the smooth, silky air. Far over the water searchlights swept the sky and the surface of the earth. Pin pricks of light came into view and gradually, as the long, narrow Gallipoli Peninsula resolved itself into a black smudge against the water, the whole battle seemed to be laid out beneath him for Rud's inspection.

They were only four thousand feet high because it was misty at a higher altitude, and Rud had to think twice to realize what was going on there in the straits. The eighteen vessels of the fleet were like so many toy boats, and the searchlights playing from the fortresses at the narrows seemed like fairy flashlights. The fleet was firing steadily at the fortifications, and the fire was being returned with interest. The mine sweepers had reached the narrows themselves and were halfway through

that bottle neck of water which was scarcely half a mile wide.

The first faint touches of dawn were tinting the eastern sky as the two ships passed over Kum Kale on the Asiatic side of the straits and steered their course directly for the cliffs on the Gallipoli side. Down below the firing never ceased. The sailors aboard the battle-ships were working like Trojans, stripped to the waist. From a fort set on a slight slope on the Gallipoli side of the narrows never-ending pin pricks of light flashed as the guns spoke.

Looking up the straits Rud could see on the right-hand side the narrow fringe of low, marshy land which merged abruptly into towering cliffs. On the Gallipoli side the cliffs rose almost sheer from the water.

As the ships crossed the straits the terrain of the peninsula came in sight. It was rolling and wooded, with here and there a road winding its tortuous way over the rugged earth.

Suddenly Rud's eyes froze to a point on the cliffs well up toward the narrows. He was flying two hundred feet above and five hundred feet back of the DeHaviland. For a full five seconds he sat motionless in his ship, his neck craned over the side, as he took in the significance of what he had seen. There were hidden

fortifications on those cliffs, and he had seen a battery come in sight, send its shells out into the straits, and then disappear again.

He nosed his ship over just at the moment that the sun peeked over the horizon, and in a few seconds had drawn up alongside of the De-Haviland. He pointed frantically at the cliffs below. He saw Major Ashcroft nod. Even as they watched, the roof over a hidden battery seemed to roll away, the guns rose, spewed forth their shower of death and destruction, and sank into their hiding place once more.

"Great Scott!" Rud thought swiftly. "Those ships are in a tough enough spot getting through the narrows and the fire from the shore without those hidden babies to contend with. I don't believe they can make it——"

Then he saw lifeboats being lowered from one of the vessels below. It was settling gradually, completely out of commission, as the sailors frantically leaped for safety, and in their small boats rowed like mad for the other ships. It was one of the four French vessels, he thought. There were fourteen of the British ships, most of them, he understood, not the most modern of naval fighting craft. The *Inflexible* was one of the newer ships, but the others were neither the last word in naval craft,

nor did they mount the largest and most efficient guns.

Temporarily fascinated by the drama being played out below, he had forgotten the air completely. Suddenly, as though some sixth sense had warned him, he looked upward. All at once two things came to him with stunning shock. The DeHaviland, a hundred feet or so ahead of him now, had suddenly gone into a spin, and darting out of the thin, slowly raising ground mist five hundred feet above them a Fokker came roaring downward.

It was diving at a right angle to the course of the Allied planes, and its pilot, alone in the two-seated Fokker monoplane, was pumping lead from his rear seat gun.

"He must have got the DeHaviland!" was the thought which shot through Riley's mind. He, the supposed guardian of the other ship, had been asleep at the switch.

Instinctively he pulled back on the stick. The Nieuport zoomed upward until it seemed to stand on its tail; his hand pressed the gun control and sent a shower of lead toward the Fokker which was streaking across the sky. For three seconds he fired, striving furiously to get a bead on his enemy, and then, as one of his center section struts suddenly was shredded to

fibers before his eyes, the roar of the motor rose in a terrific, high-pitched bellow, like that of an ambushed beast. The propeller splintered into a thousand pieces, and the racing engine began to fling itself violently about as if in a mad endeavor to tear itself loose from its moorings.

In a flash Rud, cursing savagely, had cut the ignition as he sent the ship into a dive. The German pilot, firing into his radiator and propeller, had put him completely out of commission. How could they ever warn the fleet now of those hidden guns?

As he spun his ship toward the ground in an attempt to demonstrate to the Fokker pilot that no more shots were necessary, Rud was cursing himself with a cold ferocity which turned his bronzed face into a white mask and made his eyes not good to see. Gordon was right, he raved. He forgot that Gordon himself had been taken by surprise, and there were two pair of eyes in that DeHaviland. The shielding mist had been an effective screen for the lone Fokker. That and luck had been responsible for their both being knocked off like two helpless babes.

His tragic eyes searched the ground, and he realized that there was no hope of avoiding a crash. The peninsula was a couple of miles

wide at that point and there was no chance whatever to make the water.

The Fokker was spiraling down behind him now, but its gun was silent. The DeHaviland was close to the ground and Rud, his whole being in the grip of utter misery such as he had never felt before, watched it with anguished eyes. Would it ever come out of that spin, or had Gordon and Ashcroft both been hit?

A shout of relief escaped him as he brought his own ship out of the spin. The DeHaviland straightened out and with sudden hope flaming in his own heart, Rud saw Gordon turn for a landing on a straight strip of road which ran up the side of a hill. It looked as though there might be wing space between the undergrowth on each side of the yellow trail.

Then he saw the DeHaviland's propeller pick up speed as Gordon gave it a burst to help his landing.

"They don't act as though they were out of commission," he thought in bewilderment. He forgot that, however, as, with eyes alternating between the ground below and the watchful Fokker above him, he prepared to make his own landing.

He saw the DeHaviland come to rest safely almost at the top of the hill. If they could get down, he could, he thought.

Appearing to come right out of the ground itself he saw twenty or thirty men come in sight on the cliffs and start to make their way down toward the landing ships.

"It won't be long before we're prisoners for the duration of the war," Riley thought furiously.

He was flying automatically, dropping his ship down toward the stretch of road which Gordon had used for a landing, but his mind was darting around like a hound seeking the scent in an endeavor to find some way out. They must not be caught helplessly in a horrible trap like this one.

He dropped his ship down on the rutted, sandy road, and for the next three seconds fought desperately with rudder and stick to keep it from plunging into the washes on either side. It came to rest within fifty feet of the DeHaviland. It did not occur to him that landing with a dead stick had been a remarkable piece of flying. He had scarcely paid attention to his work, as a matter of fact, and had landed almost without conscious thought of what he was doing.

As he flung himself out of his ship he saw the Fokker circling back of them as though it, too, was coming down for a landing.

"What happened to you?" he yelled as he

ran toward Ashcroft and Gordon. His eyes traveled over the DeHaviland as the Fokker came sweeping along above their heads. It looked to be in perfect shape. The motor was idling, and there wasn't so much as a bullet hole in it.

He glanced upward at the monoplane which was barely fifty feet from them and not more than fifty feet high. Never in his entire lifetime had he seen such a dilapidated-looking ship. It seemed to have been out in the weather for months. The dope had cracked and peeled off its wings, and the linen itself apparently was about to tear away. The wires looked rusty and even the radiator was caked with grime.

The pilot patted his guns significantly, as he circled around them, and motioned them off into the undergrowth.

"It looks to me as though he meant if we didn't get away from our guns he'd use his on us from the air," Rud said slowly. "That's funny. He can't be going to land."

"We had better obey orders," the pallid Ashcroft said in clipped phrases. "There may be something we can do."

With one accord they left the road and walked to a point a hundred feet away from it, as the Fokker circled warily.

"What a mess we're in now!" Riley raved.

"Oh, shut up!" bellowed Gordon, his face like a thundercloud.

Ashcroft was tense and drawn, his eyes burning with a light which was unhealthy somehow.

"I won't do it on your orders," Rud said with slow deadliness. "Major Ashcroft, may I ask what brought you down?"

"I don't know. The motor stopped, but whether from a bullet or not I'll have to depend on Lieutenant Gordon to tell me."

"It seems to be working all right now," Riley said.

The Fokker was landing on that road. Three-quarters of a mile away the soldiers appeared on the crest of the slope. They were not hurrying, rather taking their time.

"Probably a plugged jet," rasped Gordon. "Cut in again, but it was too late to do anything."

"Oh, yes?" drawled Rud, and the inference in that softly slurred remark drew the blood rushing darkly to Gordon's face. In Rud's present condition there was no room in his mind for common sense. At the moment he was as sure as he stood there that Gordon had deliberately come down, whether through cowardice or treachery, he could not tell. That

motor was working perfectly all right now. Cut in at the last minute, huh?

He felt as though he must have some physical outlet for his feelings and it was a relief, as the Fokker came to rest behind the other two ships, to see the pilot wave them to come on. He was crouched behind his machine gun as they walked, hands in the air, straight toward its muzzle.

Rud forgot the oncoming soldiers momentarily as his gaze rested unwaveringly on the dirty, bearded face of the unknown airman. He wore no helmet and long blond hair had been snarled into a tangled mass by the wind. His goggles, made of colored glass, were still over his eyes and effectually shielded them. He was glancing at the oncoming soldiers and somehow seemed to be undergoing a terrific nervous strain.

He halted them with a gesture ten yards from his ship. He raised his goggles and a sort of wolfish smile spread over his grimy, emaciated face. Rud fairly froze in his tracks. In a second he knew that he was gazing into the eyes of a man who was stark, raving mad. The pilot, like a hunted wild thing, darted a look at the soldiers still a half a mile or so away as they swung down the curving road, and

then a flood of words in German escaped his lips.

"He's going to take our two-seater," Ashcroft translated calmly. "We're to get the other two ships out of the road under his direction. He wants to get away right away. That lunatic doesn't want to see those soldiers any more than we do."

For a second or two the three men stood there silently. It was like some fantastic dream to Rud; the pounding of the guns down below the cliffs, the hot sun, the madman with a look of unutterable cunning in his bloodshot eyes, it did not seem that there was one element of reality in the situation.

"We may have a chance somewhere," he thought swiftly. Aloud he said, "Well, let's get moving. You never can tell what may happen."

The German stayed in his ship, the machine gun ever ready, and a revolver in his hand. At the left side of the road the ditch was very wide and shallow, and it was the work of only a minute for the three airmen to pick up the tail of that oil-spotted, tattered Fokker and pull the ship to one side. Never for a minute were they not covered by the German's guns.

They did the same with the Nieuport and then swung the tail of the DeHaviland around

in a hundred and eighty degree circle for the take-off. The German climbed out of his Fokker, his revolver cocked and ready, as he ordered them back to the undergrowth. He was talking to himself steadily. His face was horribly emaciated and his inch-long beard was caked with oil and dirt. His clothes were in tatters. He was like a living skeleton, chuckling and laughing to himself, and at short intervals suddenly snapping into taut watchfulness as though he were a sort of beast prowling through the jungle with enemies on every side.

"Probably a war flyer gone nuts or something," Riley thought, but he had little stomach for speculation as he watched the German climb into the DeHaviland and was forced to stand quietly fifteen feet away from the ships, consumed with such helpless fury as he had never felt before.

Their prospective captors were out of sight now behind a hill, and it seemed that the boom of the guns had increased to a steady roar, like the roll of some great drum. The German sank into the rear seat, and the soft whisper of the idling motor suddenly increased to a rhythmic bellow as he pushed forward on the throttle.

It was as though that sound, coupled with the fact that he was not under the surveillance of those eerie eyes any more, released a spring

in the Texan's rangy body. Without conscious thought he acted. He bounded forward as the DeHaviland got under way, leaping toward it at an angle, and in one last desperate jump landed on the fuselage halfway between the tail and the rear cockpit.

As he hit the moving ship the German looked around in startled surprise. Riley, his lips twisted into a snarl, and for the moment utterly unconscious of fear and thoughtless of consequences, dug his fingers into the linen on the turtleback and his boots beat a tattoo on the elevators. The DeHaviland swerved and went crashing into the undergrowth on the left side of the road. Its propeller broke as it swished through some bushes and the tail flipped upward as the wheels sank into the ditch.

Rud was hurled as though from a slingshot, his body turning over and over as he crashed into the tangled brush twenty feet ahead of the ship. For a moment he was dazed and shaken. His face had been scratched by branches and his clothes torn. He was limping as he came to his feet unsteadily, half crouched, and parted the bushes to see what had happened to the German. There were low, guttural exclamations from Gordon. He could see Ashcroft and the big pilot tearing at the De-

Haviland, which had turned completely over. As he came forward there was an exultant roar from Gordon.

"Knocked cold!" he rasped.

It was as though those words brought Rud to himself. He burst from the bushes, his face streaming with blood, but his eyes blazing with the light of battle.

"Let's take a chance on that Fokker," he gasped.

"Right!" barked Ashcroft.

From the brow of the nearest hill the soldiers came streaming, barely a quarter of a mile away. Unconsciously Rud assumed command of the situation by saying:

"Spin the prop, Gordon. You and the major get in the rear seat."

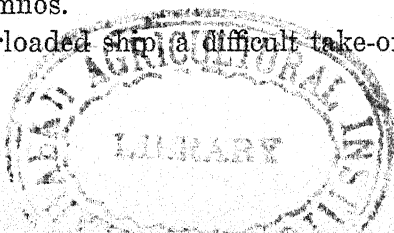
"The deuce we will! I'm the pilot in this outfit!" snapped Gordon.

"I think Lieutenant Riley should pilot," Ashcroft said evenly, as they ran for the Fokker.

"Is that so!" rasped Gordon. "Well, he's not going to pilot me."

Major Ashcroft did not seem at all breathless, despite that frantic run. His words were as calm as though they were sitting quietly back at Lemnos.

"An overloaded ship, a difficult take-off, and



he is much more experienced," he said quietly.

"I don't give a hang!" Gordon blazed. "And this exceeds your authority, Major!"

"Oh, does it?" gulped Rud. His eyes were glinting coldly and he was in a sort of red-tinted mental haze. "Well, there'll be no argument here."

They were alongside the ship now. Like a shot he wheeled and his fist thudded squarely to the huge pilot's jaw with every bit of force in his steel and whipcord body behind it. Gordon dropped like a log. Rud picked him up and temporarily he seemed to have the strength of two men. He heaved the unconscious body into the rear cockpit.

"Spin the prop, Major," he barked as he got into the front seat.

The Mercedes, still warm, caught on the first try, and in a split second Rud was out of the cockpit again as the soldiers, now on a dead run, came streaming down the slope. They lifted the tail around until the ship was facing catercornered toward the road, and a moment later, with Ashcroft standing in the rear seat and Riley, his head out the side of the cockpit, flying as he had never flown before, the dilapidated Fokker was hurtling down the road.

Bullets kicked up the dust around them, but in less than fifteen seconds they were out of

danger as far as the firing was concerned, but more deadly peril lay ahead of them. The motor, while it was not missing, seemed to have but little power, and the overloaded ship would not leave the ground. The soft sand dragged at the wheels. Desperately Rud fought it, rocking the stick back and forth in an endeavor to free it from the drag of the ground.

Barely a hundred yards from the curve in the road, which would mean their undoing if they did not get into the air, he dragged the wheels free. For a few seconds he held it in the air, then as he felt it drop, he jammed the stick forward and bounced the wheels on the ground. Gradually it picked up speed as he held it level barely a foot above the road, and strove to keep it on an absolutely straight course to avoid the undergrowth which seemed reaching for his wing tips on either side.

At the last moment he pulled back on the stick. The Fokker fairly staggered over the low trees ahead of it and then slowly settled until its undercarriage almost dragged through their tops. Fortune was with the tense pilot, however, for beyond the trees there was a small clearing seventy-five yards long with jagged rocks cropping out from its surface, and it gave him a breathing spell to gather flying speed once more. A moment later the Fokker was

laboring through the air, gaining altitude gradually as Riley steered his course for the straits.

Suddenly it seemed to Rud that all was well with the world, despite that battle going on below and the peril of their predicament. The relief of being in the air, safe and sound, made him feel in his overstimulated condition like a superman, with the world his oyster.

He gestured briefly to the major in the back seat and the major nodded. Straight up the straits, beyond the narrows went the Fokker, plowing heavily through the air. Its rusted motor seemed to creak with every revolution, and it seemed to Rud that at any moment the entire ship was liable to disintegrate under him.

They had left the battle behind now as the Sea of Marmora opened up ahead of him. His eyes froze to a string of small boats slightly back from the mouth of the straits. A hand gripped his shoulder and he turned to confront Major Ashcroft's glittering black eyes. One long-fingered hand pointed downward.

"They are sending floating mines down with the current!" he roared into Rud's ear. "And look!"

The direction of his finger changed and Riley's eyes narrowed as he saw three planes suddenly materialize like specks in the misty sky. In a trice he comprehended the situation.

The mine sweepers could only account for permanently planted mines. He could see those deadly barrel-like contrivances bobbing here and there in the water now, sweeping down to destroy the fleet. No wonder a ship had sunk before his very eyes a while ago in a manner which gunfire from the shore could not explain!

He turned the Fokker in a steep bank and then had to fight the stick to right it again. Behind him those planes were diving like mad for him. They had been waiting there to guard the mine layers from an aërial reconnaissance, and the fact that he was flying the Fokker could not save him. That mad pilot could have no official connection with the Turkish or German air forces, although he might have had before, and with their two planes in full sight on the peninsula and Major Ashcroft in uniform plainly discernible, there was no chance to get away with the first wild idea which had leaped into his head, to attempt to join them and then shoot them down.

Furthermore, the fleet must be warned of its certain fate——

There was but one thing to do. He could not hope to avoid being overtaken unless he resorted to one method. He sent the quivering Fokker into a steep dive abruptly down the straits. It seemed about to shake itself to

pieces, and the rotten linen, by all indications, was in imminent danger of being stripped from the spars. The roar of the motor rose until it was deafening, and the air stream swept back with such force as to cause Major Ashcroft to cover his nose with his hand to breathe.

Rud, like a grim-faced statue, held it in that dive, straight down the straits. They were now over the narrows, barely five hundred feet high, darting straight through the rain of firing from both sides. The enemy ships were diving even faster, but not yet had they come close enough to shoot.

Rud forgot them and did not realize it when they, just before they came in range of the fire from the forts and the ships, gave up the chase.

Subconsciously Rud noted that the *Inflexible*, the pride of the fleet, was in distress. It was losing way and was apparently listing a bit.

He was but a hundred feet above the water now, and a thousand geysers rose beneath him as the shells struck the surface of the straits. Suddenly he was aware of a sort of transcendent calm and clarity of mind. As though on a quiet practice flight he picked his ship. The Fokker was skimming above the water now and a hundred feet to one side of it he cut the sputtering motor dead.

He held his ship in the air as long as he could.

As it started to drop he jerked the stick all the way back into his lap and the aged monoplane thudded to the water.

Rud was completely submerged as he tore wildly at the belt to free himself. As he came to the surface he saw that Gordon had come to, and that he and the major were clinging to the partially submerged fuselage.

A boat was being lowered from the side of the ship.

"It was our only chance," he gasped, "and we can tell 'em about those mines now, besides."

For some reason he noticed that not so much as a hair of Major Ashcroft's head was ruffled. His uniform collar and his shirt and necktie projected above the water and, in some incongruous way, he seemed as perfectly groomed as ever.

"Very good work," the major said quietly.

The boat was pulling toward them now and the steady boom of the guns had become so familiar that Rud scarcely noticed it. His eyes met Gordon's gaze.

"I can understand you wanting to do the flying," he drawled, "but I wasn't sure you could make it, I guess, and I was sure I could."

Gordon nodded. His heavy face seemed brooding somehow and not a word did he say.

A young ensign was the first officer to greet them. Striding down the deck came the captain and two other officers.

"Major Ashcroft, Military Intelligence, sir," the major introduced himself. "We have discovered that up at the straits of Marmora they are setting loose dozens of floating mines which will be swept down at your fleet by the current, and will, I believe, destroy it. We had no opportunity for detailed observation, but the water will be alive with them. I should recommend that the fleet be withdrawn to save it. Later on land attacks could be made at various points on the peninsula with more chance of effective results."

The gray-mustached naval man shot three questions at the composed Ashcroft. It seemed but a few seconds later that a continuous series of signals to the flagship were being sent, and by the time Rud was getting dry clothes from one of the officers the fleet had started to steam down the straits, while thousands of strained seamen searched the water with their eyes for signs of the deadly underwater bombs which were washing down upon them like a school of predatory fish.

"Three ships down and two foundered, but thirteen of them saved," thought Rud, as he emerged in the uniform of a naval officer.

That those floating mines would have destroyed the fleet had they gone down in the large numbers which had been prepared up at the mouth of the straits, would have been a certainty, and the young Texan basked pleasantly in the unemotional but sincere congratulations of the ship's officers for several hours.

He and Gordon met at the bottom of a hatchway. For a moment there was silence.

"Well," drawled Rud, "any hard feelings?"

Gordon shook his head, but his expression did not lighten.

"Just what's the wild hate against me?"

Gordon shrugged his shoulders.

"You're too cocky to suit me," he said flatly, "and you haven't been always dependable, you know, scooting off after an enemy ship, time after time, when our business was to stick to our knitting, and get home with the dope. I preferred Fitz-Carson along, that's all, and I preferred to take off that ship myself."

"I can understand that," Rud acknowledged, "but you're no gift yourself, you know. How do you get away with sassing Major Ashcroft, and——"

"That doesn't concern you," Gordon said slowly. "But I'm not in the habit of talking out of turn. You can paste that in your hat. Major Ashcroft's authority and my own are

somewhat different. I don't mind risking my neck, but I hate to follow a maniac who acts sometimes as though he'd rather die than live. Maybe I'm not quite myself. I don't quite know what to do about it. Well, let's forget it."

Rud was to remember those words later and in the following months when the true story of that mad German flyer reached him—how he had stolen one of the ships of his squadron after he had lost his mind and for months appeared mysteriously everywhere from the Russian front to Turkey—his thoughts always reverted to Major Ashcroft, as though there was a kinship between the mind of the Englishman and the twisted brain of the German.

At the moment, though, Gordon's half soliloquy did not affect him, or his thoughts of the future. He had not followed the pallid major as long or as far as Gordon had, as yet.

CHAPTER V

THE MAD MAJOR

IT DEVELOPED that their stay in the Dardanelles was not to be prolonged. Their mission successfully completed, prompt orders sent them back to the Western Front. Much water proceeded to flow over the dam for Rud and the other flyers, but emergencies were neither as interesting nor perilous as had been the assignment across the Mediterranean. That was soon to change, however, and Rud had a slight suspicion that action was just around the corner as he and his pudgy companion rocked along over one of the roughest roads in Belgium which is saying considerable.

The pudgy man was Porter, and he seemed to be enjoying the trip a great deal more than Riley. So much so, in fact, that he was singing a song of the trenches in a loud and raucous tenor. The fat little Canadian was undoubtedly the craziest flyer Riley had ever seen. Inasmuch as Rud, himself, was no apostle of conservatism in the air, that was saying a good deal.

"I don't imagine that Ashcroft called us back from our first leave in a year just for the pleasure of our society," Rud drawled.

As the car plunged along toward the air-drome, Rud forgot Porter's gay song in his musings over all that had happened since, he, along with Porter and two other flyers, had been called to assume special duties under the command of the mysterious Major Ashcroft.

From one end of the Allied front to the other, that same quintet, all of whom miraculously were still alive, were whispered about. They had a thousand nicknames by now, from the "Phantom Five" to the "Flying Shock Troops."

Emergency had followed emergency so fast that life had been literally a daze to the tall Texan. From the time a year ago, when they had uncovered the secret of the first German gas attack underneath a cloud of Fokkers, through the Dardanelles campaign and half the major engagements of the western front, there had been few dull days in the life of the Phantom Five.

Ordinarily such swift and continuous adventure would have been meat and drink to the devil-may-care Texan, but somehow he had been less than happy during all that time. He had a queer feeling that he was a sort of outsider

—his mates did not confide in him as they did in each other. He had got the small end of the stick, in his opinion, many times. Little Porter, now gazing owlsh-eyed at a detachment of Belgian soldiers who were swinging by, did not come under that heading. But the other three were still subjects of speculation and a sort of bewildered resentment to Rud.

They were close to the airdrome now and as its wind bag came in view Riley's thought shifted to what might lie ahead. Major Ashcroft had not called them back from their brief leave, as he had remarked to Pudgy, in order to pass the time of day with them, and if what lay ahead did not partake of the unusual it would be the first time in the history of the Phantom Five that such had been the case.

The little shack which was Major Ashcroft's headquarters was at one end of the small airdrome and separated by a considerable distance from the headquarters of the English squadrons which were based there. The Phantom Five had been there only a week.

When Rud entered his C.O.'s office, Major Ashcroft was indulging in one of his favorite occupations, which was poring over maps more detailed than any Rud had ever seen. For a moment Ashcroft did not look up.

Riley's eyes never left his chief. During that

hectic year he had never come close to penetrating the mystery that was the major.

The other four members of the outfit were far from cautious men. Major Ashcroft, however, made the rest of them seem like old women, Rud reflected, as he stood there. If he placed the value of his life as high as one penny, Rud had never discovered it. There was an utter recklessness in him which did not seem to be born of eagerness or impulsiveness. Rather it was of a nature so cold that it was almost terrible. Sometimes Rud had an uneasy feeling that he was following a madman to whom other lives were as unimportant as his very own.

"Oh, hello, Riley," the major said suddenly in his clipped, precise phrases. With those burning eyes bent on him, he looked up in surprise. Rud knew that the major was not pretending to be astonished at his presence—he had been so immersed in his map and his thoughts that he had never even noticed his subordinate.

"Pudgy came with me, sir, but he wasn't feeling so well. He can be found in his quarters if you want him."

"Fitz-Carson won't be in for a couple of hours and Gordon is busy, so he can sleep for a while. Meanwhile, Riley, you will test two

Fokkers, one scout, and one two-seater. They're in hangar six and the mechanics have them ready."

"What?" It was a surprised grunt from Riley. "Two Fokkers, did you say?"

"Exactly, and the quicker the better."

Without further explanation the major picked up the telephone, nodding as though in dismissal. His clean-cut face, white as wax in the contrast to his jet black, closely cropped mustache, was as expressionless as a statue's.

Rud walked out with his mind awlirl. At the end of the five minutes, when he was climbing into a trim little single-seated Fokker biplane, he had come to no decision as to what the possession of these ships might mean. Unquestionably they were to work behind the German lines in some way, but the objective, so important as to warrant all the trouble which must have been necessary to get these ships, eluded him. It took him but a moment to decide that unquestionably they had been especially built and not captured. They were correct, as far as he could tell, in every detail, from the tubular steel construction of struts and spars to the Mercedes motor.

He took off in the single-seater, but for once his airman's mind did not dwell long on the performance of his ship. He was too busy

wondering vaguely about the future. The Mercedes fired evenly, without a miss, and the feather-light ship performed faultlessly. Ordinarily Rud would have stunted the sturdy craft just to gratify his own surging love of the air, but now he merely flew around the field a few times, banked it, climbed it and dived it, and then brought it down to a three-point landing.

The second ship was a two-seater and he noticed that it had already been prepared for camera work. It was a monoplane, and as he moved the controls while still on the ground to test them, he was noticing that there had been blocked out on its sides, although still not painted in, the insignia of one of the German squadrons stationed in Belgium. Evidently the objective was in Belgium then.

Without thinking, he jerked back on the stick abruptly as his other hand pushed the throttle of the Mercedes forward to open the motor wide. Mechanics were leaning against the wing tips to keep the ship from jumping the blocks. The stick did not come back for a second—the man on the tail must be leaning against the elevators.

An instant later Rud was staring down into the cockpit stupidly. The stick had broken off in his hands.

For a moment he sat there like a statue, his eyes wide behind his goggles. Automatically he cut the racing motor to idling as his mind strove to comprehend what had happened. Then, suddenly, his eyes narrowed, and they were blazing with an unholy light. Very deliberately, he inspected the segment of the stick in his hand, and then the socket into which it had fitted.

It had broken just at the place where it entered the socket and the portion of it which fitted into the metal container was still there. Had the stick merely come out of the socket in the air, it would have been easy to reinsert it and handle the plane perfectly. Breaking where it had, with the socket plugged by the lower end of the stick, he would have been utterly helpless had it broken in the air.

Then his eyes froze to the break in it. For three-quarters of the diameter of the stick the break was as clean as a whistle, but the rest of it was jagged. In a split second he saw what must be the truth. Somebody had sawed that stick from the front toward the back, he thought swiftly. On the take-off, pushing forward, it would have been all right. The minute it was pulled back it would break and the flyer would have been out of luck.

Suddenly a sort of icy composure came over

him and his mind was working like a well-oiled machine. It was unquestionably a deliberate attempt to destroy that ship and its occupants on the very first take-off, and that meant that somewhere among the five flyers and ten mechanics of the outfit there was a traitor.

There was no two ways about this, Rud told himself as he climbed out of his ship. Suddenly the nervous strain which was an inseparable part of his existence became something so terrific that he couldn't keep his muscles from quivering. Each hazard was increased a thousandfold, and the special duty squadron became to him a haunted outfit with perils within it more potent than those on the outside.

He said nothing to the amazed mechanics. They followed him with stupefied eyes as he strode toward headquarters with long, unhurried strides, carrying the stick in his hands. As he crossed the road which separated the hangars from the row of barracks and the administration buildings a man emerged from Major Ashcroft's headquarters as though he had been shot from a gun.

It was Sergeant Teller, chief mechanic of Major Ashcroft's own ship, a two-seated De-Haviland. The sergeant's always prominent eyes were now bulging until they could have been knocked off with a stick, and his round

face was red as a beet. His mustache was in constant motion as he seemed to be trying to utter words which would not come.

"Well, Sergeant, you look a little upset," Riley drawled placidly, but his eyes were very far from peaceful and his bronzed face was white underneath.

"I saw you coming and knew there was something wrong," stuttered Teller. "What's the meaning of that stick, sir?"

Rud told him incisively, as he thought to himself, "It appears as though the sergeant is a bit of a mind reader."

And yet, somehow, it seemed impossible to suspect the noncommissioned Sergeant Teller. He knew that for twelve years Teller had been a sort of personal attaché to Major Ashcroft—a combination of servant, Man Friday and minor executive as far as military matters went. He was a rock that the major leaned on for everything. But then every member of the special duty squadron was supposed to be above suspicion.

"That's that," Rud concluded. "Now I'll tell the major."

"I am looking at it but I can't believe it!" sputtered Teller.

"Better find out exactly who was around the ship this morning and who was guarding it last

night," Rud told him evenly, and somehow it seemed to him that the sergeant was uncomfortable under his steady gaze.

Without further words he went on to the major's headquarters, leaving behind him a worried sergeant who stood as though rooted in his tracks for a full minute after Rud had left him.

As Riley entered the office, he was an entirely different person from the devil-may-care young man who had left it a few minutes before. His eyes were bright and hard—his lips a thin line, and every muscle in his body was tense.

"Well, that's my opinion anyway," he heard a familiar gruff voice saying as he entered.

"Hello, Gordon," Rud said briefly to the giant of a man who was standing at the window.

"What happened?" snapped the major. He did not move, but sat behind the desk as though carved in stone.

Riley's eyes flickered from the major's pallid face to the countenance of Gordon.

"You look as though you'd seen a ghost," Gordon told him, and there was a queer combination of resentment and amusement in his eyes and voice.

"I haven't seen one, but I came near being one," Riley told him bluntly. "Look at this stick! It was sawed from front to back right

on the socket line, and if I hadn't broken it off accidentally before taking off, it would have broken in the air and I would have been sunk. This was cut by a saw, and just enough was left uncut to keep it from breaking when it was pushed ahead."

There was a moment of tense silence as the two men stared at the stick. Suddenly Ashcroft's eyes were suffused with red, and his lips turned white until his mouth was merely a gash across his pallid face. Somehow Gordon did not seem to be greatly surprised, Rud reflected. But, then, Gordon was never surprised. He was accustomed to perform whatever duty he was called upon to do with a sort of dogged, stolid persistence. It was all in the day's work to him.

Not a muscle in the major's body moved. He stared at the stick as though hypnotized, and it seemed to Rud that a tortured soul was mirrored in his eyes.

"Were you and Gordon going to fly the two-seater?" Rud asked slowly, and the sound of his voice snapped the tension in the room.

"Yes," Ashcroft snapped.

"This means that we have traitors about."

"And that," Gordon interrupted in his heavy bass, "means plenty. Better call off any plans until we get to the bottom of this, Major."

"We can't," Ashcroft said, as if half to himself.

A thousand thoughts seemed fighting for utterance in Rud's mind, but somehow, in his abnormal condition, it seemed that he could not find the words to express himself. He stood silent as the major went on:

"It looks as though you and I were very fortunate, to say nothing of Riley here. Why haven't Fitz-Carson and Porter got here?"

"They should be here in a minute," Gordon told him.

He took out a cigarette and lit it.

Somehow, Ashcroft's casual dismissal of the incident and all it portended and Gordon's unworried air made Riley's racing mind form picture after picture of the Fokker rising off the ground, suddenly stalling out of control, and plunging to earth with him in it. He saw the flames wrapped over the ship and gnawing greedily at his unconscious body, and as he looked at the two silent flyers he felt as if there was something inhuman about them both.

"Well, what are you going to do?" he burst forth. "Somebody in this crew is a spy or something, out to get us—and you two sit around as though it meant nothing to you!"

"Be yourself, Riley," Ashcroft snapped. "This is my business."

Gordon said nothing. But as Riley met the big flyer's turbulent dark eyes he was utterly infuriated by what he thought was Gordon's amusement at his condition. The hot-tempered Texan started to go on and then stopped himself. He scarcely knew why, but somehow the icy composure of Ashcroft, as always, seemed to stop what would have been a wild tirade.

He heard voices, and the next minute Porter, his merry eyes slightly bloodshot and his round face flushed, strode into the room with ridiculously short, choppy strides. He was endeavoring to be very military as he saluted the major. Behind him was Fitz-Carson.

The tall Englishman nodded casually to Rud and then remarked in his customary flat, unhurried accents, "You look a bit depressed, old chap."

"I should be," Riley told him. "Look at this."

As he described briefly what had happened Porter's round face became a study. His eyes widened and his jaw dropped in utter astonishment, not unmingled with fear.

Fitz-Carson's cold gray eyes never changed expression, and as he pulled at his close clipped mustache, he seemed to be inspecting the stick with a sort of passionless interest, as though it was a new specimen of some sort which had no

particular importance one way or the other.

"Well, what are we to do about it?" he inquired, smoothing his colorless blond hair.

"Sergeant Teller will have all the information available shortly," Ashcroft said tersely. "I am not worried about that. I am worried about the possibility of information having reached the enemy that we are in possession of two Fokkers. However, that possibility must not interfere with our plans. Now, gentlemen, sit down while I give you your instructions."

It seemed that the rangy flyer was correct in his estimate of his C.O., for Ashcroft wasted no more time on the incident. It was as though it had never happened, as he went on:

"As you gentlemen realize, Germany's submarine campaign has been literally paralyzing Allied shipping, sinking hundreds of thousands of tons each month. President Wilson has already forewarned them that their submarine policy has become a menace to even neutral nations.

"Germany's greatest U-boat base," Ashcroft went on deliberately, "outside of Kiel, is at Zeebrugge, one hundred and fifty miles from us on the coast. Operating from this sub-base in the North sea her U-boats have made the English Channel the most perilous strip of water in the world. Destruction of the locks

on the canal in Zeebrugge will tie up this base which is at present the greatest single menace to Allied success. To-morrow morning we must secure detailed photographs of the locks and surrounding territory in order to form a mosaic preliminary to a night bombing raid on them. These photographs will also make it possible, we hope, to make the locks the target for long range guns if the bombing operations fail. Naturally, they are protected by considerable concentration of troops, artillery and aircraft."

Rud, his heart pounding like mad, felt as though he was in a dream. The major's quiet words made it seem as though the deed before them was comparatively simple, and the detail was purely a matter of form. As a matter of cold fact they would be flying into the very jaws of death. German airplanes would be thick as flies night and day, and Rud knew that they were ceaselessly alert to prevent any possible damage to one of their greatest strategic weapons. In ordinary circumstances the task would have been almost impossible; now it was sheer madness.

"The method will be this," the major went on talking.

"Gordon and myself, escorted by Lieutenant Riley in the single-seated Fokker, will take off

at dawn to-morrow, go over the lines as high as possible, and drop down over the base in the hope that we will not be discovered as Allied airmen. Fitz-Carson and Porter, in their regular ships, will lead twenty or thirty other Allied planes over the lines and endeavor to engage the enemy in a battle of such dimensions that attention will be diverted from us. That's all, gentlemen."

"It's crazy!" Riley stormed. "If there is a man in this outfit that would saw a stick to kill a couple of us, do you think that he wouldn't tell the enemy that we've got a couple of Fokkers, and that they won't be laying for us? It's crazy, I tell you——"

"Riley!"

That single word coming from the major was like the lash of a whip, and for a second it halted the blazing Texan. The next minute, though, he was going on as if it were impossible to dam the emotions seething within him.

"I'm sorry, sir, and I didn't mean to be disrespectful," he rushed on. "Maybe I am not myself, but I don't like to commit suicide. Call me yellow, or anything you like, any of you, but I am the one who sat in that ship and this stick came off in my hands and I'm telling you——"

"It's a flyer's privilege to refuse to go into the air at any time!"

The major had not raised his voice and with his first words the effect upon those present was as though a bucket of ice water had been poured on the fire.

Rud stopped as though a hand had been clapped over his mouth, and for a moment the major's words stunned him.

"Lieutenant Gordon and myself are flying the two-seated Fokker. Which one of you other gentlemen will take Riley's place?"

There was a moment of tense silence. Rud felt that he was struggling against a resistless current. The major had a sort of hypnotic influence over him always and now, almost beside himself with nervousness and furious resentment as he had been, he still could not help himself from saying, "I'm sorry, sir, but I don't want a substitute. I'll go along."

The major's eyes rested on him briefly. There wasn't the slightest change of expression in his white mask of a face. It seemed that his eyes were looking into the future, and Riley realized that to Ashcroft he was merely a cog in a machine. The mad major would think nothing of dropping down over Zeebrugge, and that the chances were ten to one that the men he assigned to help him would be killed meant equally little to him.

"I'm following a lunatic," Rud raged to

himself, and yet he knew that he could not help himself.

"Well, everything all shipshape?" Fitz-Carson asked mildly.

"Oh, by the way, Major, I have a note for you. A carrier from G.H.Q. gave it to me in town—he was in a hurry and I signed for it, as your adjutant."

Rud subsided weakly into a chair as Fitz-Carson took an envelope from his pocket and laid it on the major's desk. Gordon had not said a word nor had Porter. Gordon's eyes, however, were fixed on the major with a peculiar glint in their depths. During Rud's outburst he had been subconsciously aware that Porter had been gazing at him with wide-eyed astonishment; Fitz-Carson with a sort of impersonal interest; Gordon with that buried amusement which drove the reckless young Texan frantic.

Suddenly it seemed to him that there was a tautness in the atmosphere for which there was no explanation. He felt there was a tremendous interest on Gordon's part, as well as Fitz-Carson's, in what was in that message. There was utter silence as Ashcroft unfolded the sheet of flimsy paper and perused the three or four typewritten lines written on it. Rud found himself gazing at the major as though expect-

ing something unusual. Ashcroft seemed to stiffen in his chair. His eyes darted over the paper again and then very slowly he laid it face down on the desk.

"There is some slight change in our plans, gentlemen," he said finally, and as he spoke his eyes suddenly became terrible. It was as though he was holding himself in with a tremendous effort. Behind his composed exterior Rud could feel a raging torrent of emotion. "I have orders from general headquarters to do no more flying myself until further advised," Ashcroft went on. "Consequently, Riley will fly the photographic ship; Gordon will take the pictures and Fitz-Carson will fly the other Fokker. That's all, gentlemen."

Without a word the four men filed out of the office, and Rud's last mental picture was of Ashcroft sitting quietly behind his desk with the look of a man who had been mortally wounded.

CHAPTER VI

PRICELESS NEGATIVES

"It's silly," Rud burst forth. "When I am around Ashcroft, I fall for his goofy ideas for some reason, but it's silly. A stick sawed; every Heinie in Belgium laying for us when we go over!"

"Listen, Riley."

It was Gordon's heavy voice.

He stopped in his tracks and turned, awaiting the Texan. Rud had raised his voice and Gordon and Fitz-Carson had evidently overheard him.

"If you don't want to go, say so, but quit grouching," he told Rud steadily.

"You're in a bit of a funk, old boy," Fitz-Carson drawled quietly.

For a second the raging Riley gazed into Gordon's eyes as he strove to find words to express his wrath. Again that infuriating feeling of being on the outside of things, of internal hazards more perilous than any the Germans could supply, swept over him. He felt like a

child, and that feeling increased his rage into a sort of madness.

"Who asked you for your opinion?" he flamed, his voice thick with wrath. "I'll say what I please, when I please, and how I please. I'll go, but I am still saying that the whole thing is nuts! The Fokker idea is a good one, but it won't work now, and its failure will prevent the same thing from being done later."

"Listen, Riley." As though by magic the surly Gordon's voice became suddenly soft and for the first time in over a year of duty together there was a hint of softness in his attitude. "I understand how you feel, but I'm telling you for the good of everybody—keep your mouth shut tight and don't mention that stick again! Well, Fitz, let's get to a telephone. Shall we?"

Gordon turned abruptly and he and the long-legged Englishman sauntered off through the darkness, leaving behind them a flyer whose mind was in a far from placid state.

At three o'clock the next morning Rud stood on the line watching long banners of flame stream from the exhaust pipes of the two Fokkers.

Mechanics were hunched in the cockpits watching the instruments with strained attention, and the roar of the Mercedes motors be-

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came louder and louder as the throttle crept ahead and the trim ships strained at the wheel blocks like live things anxious to be gone.

According to Ashcroft, every mechanic had been strenuously quizzed without one single clue as to who might have been responsible for the sawing of the stick.

Ashcroft was walking up and down the line now, and Riley's eyes followed him with a mixture of pity and bewilderment in his gaze. His heart was in his mouth, and it seemed that it was difficult for him to breathe as the moment of the take-off approached. He felt like a condemned murderer with the noose being adjusted around his neck; and yet for the life of him he could not do what his common sense told him they should all do—refuse to obey the orders of their commander.

He had taken an hour to inspect every wire and pin on the ship he was to fly, but the fact that it was in perfect condition did not relieve his dread. He felt as though each one of those gnome-like mechanics was an enemy and that the very air about him breathed menace.

"Of course, they haven't found out anything. Any one of those mechanics could have done that stick stunt at any time during the last few days and got away with it. And whoever did it must be in the pay of the Germans unless

maybe one of them's got a personal grudge against the major or Gordon," he thought to himself.

He was like a drowning man clutching at a straw as he seized on that thought to make himself feel better. The improbability of spite being behind the sabotage he thrust resolutely from his mind, and as he climbed into the front seat of the photographic ship, he had temporarily hypnotized himself into the belief that perhaps the enemy had not been forewarned.

As he taxied out on the field he could fairly feel Ashcroft's eyes following the ships. Gordon was seated in the back seat and Fitz-Carson in the single seater followed the larger Fokker on its course.

The Fokker drove steadily upward under Rud's accustomed hand, and down below them on the shadowed airdrome the Nieuport scout was warming up.

Rud turned his ship to make a wide circle north as it steadily gained altitude, and never once during the next three-quarters of an hour did he turn to look at Gordon in the back seat.

Twelve thousand, fifteen thousand, then eighteen thousand feet, with Fitz-Carson drumming alongside of him, and now the two Fokkers were stealing over the German lines swathed in the morning mist. Rud's eyes

darted around him ceaselessly. He felt as though he might run into an ambush at any second, and as mile after mile unreeled behind them, and as the North Sea loomed ahead of him, he began to feel a little better and the tension eased.

The mist was being burned away by the sun now, and away off in the sky he saw six tiny specks speeding toward the lines. He flew up the coast many miles behind the German lines, and ten miles ahead of him the canal of Brugge and the quays and docks extending from the mouth of the canal were plainly visible. He turned around and saw Gordon, glasses to his eyes, searching the horizon in an endeavor to spot the Allied ships which were scheduled to make their attack in order to divert attention from the two Fokkers.

Suddenly Gordon turned to him and nodded. Rud could not even see any ships, except perhaps a dozen scattered patrol crates, but he knew that the glasses must have picked up Porter and his aids.

As he throttled the Mercedes to eight hundred revolutions and sent the Fokker in a fast dive for the locks, Gordon was bent low in his cockpit getting the camera ready. The pictures were to be taken from twelve thousand feet and luck was with them because now the morning

mist had been burned out and photographic conditions were excellent.

Fitz-Carson remained at fifteen thousand feet as Rud, five miles from his objective, leveled out the Fokker at twelve thousand feet and the camera commenced to click.

Straight along the coast he flew and now it seemed to his restless eyes that swarms of eager German planes were rising swiftly from a dozen different points. Far away to the east he could now see myriad specks in the air, and he knew that the Allied planes had started their fake raid. German ships were hurrying to the spot and the white puffs from anti-aircraft guns were splotching the clear blue air.

They might get away with this yet. He turned five miles on the other side of the locks in order to fly back to enable Gordon to take another strip. Doubtless he had already obtained a complete view of the locks themselves, but orders were to get as nearly complete a mosaic of the surrounding territory as possible, including locations of the nearest airdromes and gun fortifications.

Suddenly his eyes froze to three ships he had not noticed before. They were seaplanes and must have risen from the water without his spotting them. "I wonder if our flying back and forth has made them suspicious," Rud

thought, and suddenly his heart was in his mouth.

He glanced upward; Fitz-Carson was circling lazily, and suddenly Rud realized that with that fierce air battle going on in the sky, it would seem queer to anyone that two Fokkers should be hovering over that vitally important German base.

Gordon was concentrated on his camera, and Rud shook the stick frantically as the three German planes came level with them a mile away and started toward them still climbing.

That they were bound for the two Fokkers and that their mission must be one of investigation was obvious. Gordon took one look and nodded as he pointed toward the lines.

Rud cut the gun for a moment as he shouted, "Have you got enough pictures?"

"Got the locks and the basin," Gordon belted. "That will have to do, and they're the main thing. Beat it for home."

Which Rud proceeded to do. His mind was racing along trying to formulate a plan in case the faster German ships found out the truth. It would be foolish to start the fight himself and take them by surprise, he thought quickly. Perhaps they could be fooled even after they were suspicious, long enough to enable the two Allied flyers to get close to their own lines.

The battle was still raging ahead of them, and three bonfires on the ground were tragic proof that it had not gone on without casualties.

The three seaplanes, all of the big, mobile-fighting ships, were diving at him now, and above them Fitz-Carson was waiting watchfully. One of the ships was a two-seater, and Rud saw the observer inspecting them with glasses to his eyes.

They were suspicious. Was there anything about his Fokker which would give it away as an Allied plane? The next second, red spots danced in front of the leading seaplanes' guns. Bullet holes appeared as though by magic in his upper wing, and the next second the three seaplanes were spreading widely in preparation for an attack. The middle one was diving to get underneath Rud's ship, the left hand one was climbing to the limit to take care of Fitz-Carson and the remaining one, which was shooting steadily after it, dived on the Fokker's tail.

Automatically Rud threw his ship into a bank and dodged through the air to spoil the gun's aim. Gordon was pumping lead from the rear seat guns and up above them Fitz-Carson was coming down in a bullet-like dive.

The next instant Rud was thrown heavily

forward, and it seemed that a red-hot iron had seared the junction between his neck and his right shoulder. He felt the blood soaking his shirt as he pulled his plane in a curving zoom.

He must knock off one of those ships. As his plane straightened he saw one of the German ships falter and go down in a flat spin. Fitz-Carson had got him. Just in time he saw the lower ship zooming straight up at them. In a flash he threw his Fokker into a bank, and Gordon had a momentary opportunity to change shots with the enemy. Rud saw the tracers enter the enemy's tail and then he shifted his eyes in a frantic search for the third plane.

Other German ships were rising from the ground now and seconds were infinitely precious.

The ship which Fitz-Carson had knocked down was spinning lazily toward the earth. Riley's heart almost stopped as his dazed eyes picked up the Fokker plane. The Englishman was limping toward the North Sea.

"Out of commission, by all that's holy," Rud thought wildly, and then he snapped back to himself as the German planes seemed to appear from nowhere and loomed directly before his eyes. In a split second he nosed his ship forward in a steep dive just as the Ger-

man airmen started to fire. He felt the ship shake as the bullets hit the rear of the fuselage, and the next moment he banked in a flash. The seaplane banked also as it flew above them, and the next second Rud stood the Fokker on its tail as he sent a burst squarely into the center of the German plane. He saw the pilot slump, and a yell of mad triumph burst from his lips.

He was unconscious of his wounds and had turned into the aërial madman that Rud Riley always became at moments like this.

Two of the enemy gone, but three others, climbing steadily, were but three thousand feet below them.

That fight was still raging over the lines, and yet it did not seem as though there was a possible chance of them getting those priceless photographs back to the airdrome.

There was one German ship left. Where was it?

Suddenly Gordon was gripping him fiercely and pointing downward. That German plane was in the most deadly strategic position of all, underneath them and pointing upward where neither the rear seat guns nor the front seat guns could reach it. Rud scarcely thought of what he was doing as, the Mercedes wide open, the Fokker vibrating terribly in the

speed of the motor dive, he jerked up on the stick. The biplane curved upward in a fast loop. His eyes were on Gordon as they came upside down and he saw Gordon hanging by his belt, sending burst after burst down at the enemy. And the enemy fell.

A hundred bullets had punctured the Fokker, but by a miracle they had hit no vital point. As he straightened out his plane and started staggering through the air toward the lines, he was gazing at the thermometer stupidly. The motor was boiling, the radiator evidently punctured.

Even without further attack could he possibly reach his objective? He turned around to look at Gordon. He saw Gordon's coveralls soaked with blood and the big fellow had relapsed weakly in the back seat. More than that, he was unconscious. The rear seat guns were useless to him now and he had but one drum of ammunition left.

His brain and body both seemed numb, somehow, as though events and impressions had come so fast that he was unable to absorb any more.

He looked around him automatically as he sent the Fokker toward the lines. He was perhaps two thousand feet above his nearest enemy.

He did not notice that down on the ground there were a thousand evidences of frantic activities, nor that anti-aircraft guns were sending up a barrage ahead of him.

Then he looked upward, and it seemed to him that what he saw could not possibly be real. A little German scout was coming down at him like a bolt from the blue, and angling toward it from one side as though to intercept its course was a Nieuport.

Where had that German come from, and where had the Allied plane, and how had the Allied plane come so far behind the lines? Perhaps both of them had been participants in the huge aërial fracas back toward the lines and the Allied flyer had seen the German steal away.

The German was coming down at him on a course absolutely parallel to Riley's own. The Allied plane was diving downward from his left. He must save his last burst for the last emergency, he thought to himself, and as he watched the two planes his lips were twisted into a snarl like that of a cornered beast prepared to make one last desperate stab for life.

The Allied plane was shooting now, but the German was holding its fodder. Suddenly the wounded Riley saw the steady fire from the Allied plane cease, although its dive did not

lessen and the first two movements of the vaguely familiar figure in the Nieuport told the desperate Rud what had happened. His guns had jammed.

Rud was driving automatically now and he was not aware of anything in the world except to watch the German ship. It was barely five hundred feet from him now, coming like a bullet, and the first shot would come at any second. Then there came into his line of vision that Allied scout, the mustache of its pilot a black streak across his face.

"Major Ashcroft!" Rud thought, too numb for surprise.

During the second or two that passed as the two planes hurtled together, Rud had an impression of the major sitting as motionless as a statue in the little plane. He was not shooting, his guns were still jammed, and evidently the German knew it, as he did not vary his course for a fraction of an inch. He was almost out of ammunition, or he would not hold his fire so long.

A sort of strangled sob burst from Riley's lips as he saw what happened.

The Nieuport never varied its course as it sped for the German. At the last second, as though realizing for the first time that there was a madman in the Nieuport, the German

banked desperately. The undercarriage of the Nieuport shattered the upflung wing of the German and sent the ship hurtling downward, its right wing a mass of wreckage, completely out of control.

His guns wouldn't work so he planned to collide him, was the thought that flashed through the awed Riley's mind.

As he saw the Nieuport, its undercarriage a wreck, straighten out for home Rud was aware of great weakness.

The Mercedes, despite the fact that the thermometer needle was against the peg, was still functioning. The throttle was wide open and Rud settled down to get his ship home before he, too, should succumb like Gordon.

And he made it.

He was so weak that he did not even turn his head to see what might have happened behind him or whether his enemies were overtaking him. He did not care. A great weariness settled down upon him, engulfed him, stunned every nerve cell in his tired body. He did not know that the major, helpless as his ship was, followed behind him and that the mere presence of an Allied plane was sufficient to make the lower Germans give up the hopeless chase.

The battle was still going on ten miles north

and keeping all other German ships occupied as the Fokker slipped across the lines, and ten minutes later was eased gently to earth by a pilot who fainted a minute after it had touched the ground.

Mechanics rushed forth to find two unconscious airmen slumped in their seats. But the priceless negatives were there.

Major Ashcroft landed a moment later, his undercarriage trailing useless below the fuselage, and he, too, was dragged, unconscious, from the heap of wreckage which had been an airplane.

It was four hours later when Rud came to, to find Gordon smoking a cigarette in the hospital bed next to his.

"How do you feel?" the gruff Gordon inquired.

"A little weak," Riley admitted. "Know what happened after you passed out?"

Gordon nodded. "I've seen the major within the last half hour. He got knocked out landing his plane."

For a moment there was silence as Riley thought of the worst nightmare in the career of the Phantom Five.

Then Gordon's husky voice, so low that it indicated his physical weakness, unmistakably got through his thoughts. "I'm apologizing,

Riley; we didn't give you a break," Gordon said.

"Perhaps not," Riley told him, "but what do you mean?"

"Well, Fitz and I knew that the major was going nuts and that on any given mission he'd be liable to blow the whole works because of his condition," Gordon said slowly. "He hasn't got much more than six months to live, you know, and he's gradually turned into a sort of maniac. We didn't want this thing to come off with the major leading it because he'd be sure to stick his head right into a lion's mouth."

"I'm beginning to see," Riley said, but somehow his groping mind could not grasp the explanation which seemed about to burst on him.

"We had that stick sawed by Teller, and we had it all fixed up so that it would prove to the major that somebody was out to get him and that he should leave off flying for a while and maybe leave the outfit. We never intended that he or anybody else should go up in that ship. It would have been discovered by Teller just before the major tested it out. We did this to stall for time while we were getting those orders from G.H.Q. and intended to use it only if necessary for the major's own good."

"I see," nodded Riley. "Why didn't you let me in on it?"

Gordon did not answer for a moment, but then he said, as though with difficulty. "I don't exactly know, but we were wrong. You and Porter were so young and cocky when you hit the outfit that I guess we considered you a couple of kids, and just took you for a fall all along the line. No reason for it; you just got on Fitz's and my nerves, I guess. But we're sorry."

Silence fell again and then Rud asked absently, "I wonder how Fitz came out?"

"We heard by radio that he landed safely alongside an Allied ship in the North Sea," Gordon told him.

Rud's thought were busy with a dozen implications in Gordon's words. Maybe he had been sort of a cocky Texas kid when he hit the outfit—right now, though, another thing interested him even more than analyzing himself. "How come you and Fitz can get orders issued just as you want?" he inquired.

Gordon's eyelids raised and for a moment a hint of a smile played over his pallid lips. "When I get a little sleep," he mumbled, "I may tell you. I've got more jobs than flying and so has Fitz."

With which Rud was forced to be content.

CHAPTER VII

CRACK-UP

RUD RILEY was feeling unusually good as he guided his Nieuport toward the North Sea on that May day in 1916, but nevertheless his mind was obsessed with one subject, due entirely to the portly figure in the other Nieuport. Pudgy Porter had become a problem to the little special duty outfit which had worked together for more than a year now, and the same Mr. Porter had become even more of a problem to Rud Riley individually than he had to the outfit in general.

Of two things the bronzed airman was utterly certain as he gazed absently down from ten thousand feet at the shell pitted area below him. One was that Pudgy Porter was probably the greatest flyer in the world. And, it might be added, the craziest!

Riley's eyes roved the sky automatically, and he was a bit more taut and watchful than usual because of the heavy clouds that spoiled his visibility. They were now over the area in which the English had been steadily ad-

vancing for the last few days, and it behooved him and Pudgy to be unusually watchful. Not that they were out for any trouble—in fact orders were that they should avoid trouble at all costs and be certain to deliver themselves and the cargo in Rud's ship to a certain air-drome near the North Sea without fail. There they were to receive orders and join Major Ashcroft at some point as yet unknown.

That there was heavy duty afoot Rud was certain, and that the square package on the floor of the Nieuport was somehow uniquely valuable to the Allied cause seemed equally sure.

These thoughts were in Riley's subconscious mind as the surface of his attention was concentrated on the scene to his right and ahead of him. He could see the flashes from dozens of guns, and tiny specks that were men marching up to the trenches which wound their tortuous way across the desolate landscape.

The Big Push was still on evidently, and almost below him heavy artillery emplacements were belching their hail of death toward the German lines. He could not spot any aircraft, either German or Allied, but he knew many of them must be lurking about in the clouds.

Probably Porter and he should swing west-

ward, away from the embattled area, he reflected. Porter, however, was five hundred yards or so ahead of him and flying at such a rate that it would be next to impossible to overtake him.

It was like the new and strange Pudgy who had evolved over the last two months, he reflected, to go booming ahead without thought or consideration for anybody else.

Suddenly Riley's eyes left the scene of carnage below and froze to Porter's ship. The battered little Nieuport had banked steeply and was flying directly east. Riley's gaze leaped ahead and he felt a curious premonition.

In a moment, dimly visible through drifting clouds and light mist, he saw a silver shape at least twelve miles away. A second later its elongated shape, different from the outline of the ordinary observation balloon, struck a responsive chord in his mind. That was the German balloon that had been bothering the English advance for days.

It was worked, rumor said, by windlasses of unusual efficiency, and attached to lorries unusually fast and mobile. More than that, its crew, from the men in the basket to the anti-aircraft gunners and windlass crew, were the most expert that the Allies had so far encoun-

tered. Finally, and most important, not less than a dozen Allied planes had bit the dust in an endeavor to knock it down——

"And that's just what that little devil is planning to do," Riley thought.

Suddenly rage took possession of him. Yet despite himself Rud found he was turning his ship and following his comrade.

Porter was as crazy as a loon; Rud raved helplessly. He was going to walk right into the lion's den against all orders, and Rud by all the rules should leave him flat.

That a terrific concentration of anti-aircraft guns was nested on the ground and had successfully repulsed other Allied flyers was scarcely less certain than that there were lurking Fokkers somewhere in the clouds to aid in the balloon's protection.

"He hasn't got a chance!" Riley thought furiously. "This is his finish, sure!"

But somehow, cargo or no cargo, orders or no orders, he could not leave him to die alone.

Now they were a thousand feet higher than the balloon and scarcely a half a mile from it. Porter had never turned around or given so much as a look or a signal to his comrade, so far as Rud knew, and now he was sending the Nieuport into a motor dive.

Rud, his motor wide open, did not dive.

Crouched in his cockpit, his eyes as watchful as a cat at a rat hole, he was scouring the sky for signs of an enemy from above.

Now the lorry to which the balloon was attached was speeding down the rutted road behind the German lines and the black anti-aircraft bursts seemed to surround the roaring Nieuport in a pattern against the sky.

Porter began to shoot. Two figures left the basket of the balloon and then parachutes flicked open. Suddenly in a great cloud of flame and smoke the great bag collapsed.

Porter's Nieuport was literally obscured by anti-aircraft bursts and it did not seem possible that the ship could live.

Rud, as though in the grip of some force that he could not control, was now squarely over the German lines—two thousand feet higher than Porter. How that other Nieuport continued to fly Riley could not understand. Pudgy had turned back toward the Allied lines and a perfect hail of fire was following him.

Rud turned, too, just as there dropped from behind the clouds a long V of five Fokkers diving on them both, with motors wide open and guns working even at that distance. In a split second Rud had made up his mind. Both he and Porter would be as helpless attempting to fight that onrushing squadron of planes as a

pair of crippled ducks, and that cargo of his was so precious——

Porter was half a mile north of him speeding back of the Allied lines and angling toward the ground fire, Rud thought. He was between the Fokkers and Pudgy, and now those avenging Boche planes were less than five hundred yards away from him. He saw their tracers passing by him. At that second, less than three miles back of the Allied front lines, he pulled back on the stick, kicked left rudder, and sent his little ship into a tail spin with motor full on. Whirling like a top it flashed earthward. The roar of the motor rose to a frenzied scream as, with ever-quickenings circles, it corkscrewed its way downward.

Veteran flyer as he was, he felt himself getting dizzy and sick in that endless spin. Five thousand, seven thousand feet, and as he looked around he thought the Germans had abandoned their chase for him and had switched to Porter. No, three of them were still following him down and only two had broken off from the main group to pursue the man who had destroyed their balloon. The other three kept up their relentless chase of Riley, careless of the Allied fire and apparently as unaware as Rud was himself of the SE-5's dropping down at them.

There was but one thought in Riley's mind; he must save that square package. There was but one thing to do, and out of his rage at Porter and his fury at himself for being sucked into a situation which had no justification, he set about it to accomplish his perilous objective with a body and mind which seemed momentarily immune to fear.

Thousands of men below watched in awe as they saw the Nieuport, less than a thousand feet above the ground, still darting toward it in that terrific spin. Slowly Rud drew back on the throttle. He pushed the stick forward and gave it opposite rudder. In a moment the ship stopped its spin and went into a bullet-like dive.

Would it come out before the ground which was rushing up to meet him swallowed both ship and pilot? For what seemed an eternity the motionless pilot waited—and barely seventy-five feet from the ground the strained ship came level.

One fleeting glance behind him and he saw that the Germans, doubtless animated by rage at the coup of the Allied flyers, had not given up the chase even though one of them was coming down in flames. Without hesitation Riley sent his Nieuport weaving and staggering downward. He scarcely realized that it

had a dozen bullet holes in it, but to an onlooker it would have seemed certain that it was out of control.

Just above a huge shell hole he threw it into a bank, nose in the air. Full top rudder sent it straight downward in a side-slip. At the last minute he pushed up his goggles, relaxed every muscle and threw up his arm to protect his face. The lower wing dug into the ground and crumpled. The ship turned a sort of cart-wheel and crumbled into a mass of wreckage as his head hit something with a terrific impact.

For just a second, entangled in that pile of débris, he fought for consciousness, and his groping arms found that square package.

It was intact. As the two Fokkers, their victim apparently safely disposed of, turned to make a dash for safety across the lines, the man they thought was dead gave a good imitation of it as he relapsed into unconsciousness.

It was forty-eight hours later, almost to a minute, when a tall, red-headed young man, whose blue eyes glinted coldly, was climbing aboard the British seaplane carrier *Engadine* out of sight of land in the North Sea. A square package was hauled aboard after him and a sailor carrying it followed Rud, as a young

officer guided him to Major Ashcroft's quarters.

Rud stood in the doorway. Before he acknowledged the monosyllabic greetings of the four men who were lounging on the bunk and two folding chairs, his eyes remained for a moment on the round, pug-nosed countenance of Pudgy Porter. A bandage around Porter's head was the only sign of wear and tear to show for his thrilling experience, as was the discolored bump on Riley's temple his only visible mark.

It appeared that the three onlookers sensed the bitterness behind Riley's eyes, and the defiance in Porter's overbright eyes turned the situation into a wordless battle.

Forty-eight hours of almost continuous thought on one subject had resulted in a decision, and now it seemed that unless he relieved the pent-up emotion within him instantly he would explode.

The sailor set down the package and withdrew.

Major Ashcroft, tall and pallid, the icy composure of his face illuminated by glowing eyes which did not burn quite so hotly now as they had during most of his months with the Phantom Five, glanced from Riley to Porter. Nothing but his eyes moved.

Fitz-Carson looked on with his customary air of passionless boredom.

Gordon, big and rugged-looking, seemed to sense what was coming and to await it.

"Well," drawled Rud finally, his words coming with sort of deadly slowness, "I suppose you've heard the whole story of the latest Pudgy Porter achievement."

"What do you mean?" snapped Porter, coming to his feet.

"We've heard about it, yes," Ashcroft said in clipped phrases. "What's on your mind, Riley?"

"Just this. Porter here is an anchor around this outfit's neck and he ought to be kicked out of it."

"Oh-ho!" murmured Fitz-Carson, with a sort of cold relish.

"What the deuce do you mean?" sputtered Porter, but there was fear in his eyes and his fleshy face seemed to sag.

Ashcroft's hands smoothed the white hair of his temples and his eyes as they looked at Porter were a mixture of condemnation and pity.

"Take that back, or I'll knock your head off!" Porter raged. "Who are you to talk? You false alarm——"

"Quiet!" Ashcroft slid in, and one could fairly feel the clink of ice in his voice.

Porter subsided into silence, but his eyes were not good to see. He was like a cornered rat and somehow the suspicion which Rud had had for months that the little Canadian had lashed himself into abnormality was proven then and there. It was as though Porter, knowing himself wrong, would maintain that he was right until the last ditch.

"All right, Riley, what do you mean?" the major asked coolly.

"I mean this," Riley told him slowly. "On the flight north, with definite orders to avoid trouble, Porter deliberately flies fifteen miles out of his way to get that balloon. I, like a fool, stick by him, and it's just a twin miracle that we and your package are here!"

"That's a lie. I'm——"

"Shut up!" Riley exploded. "You've lied yourself, as you have a dozen times before! And don't say another word, or I'll break you in two—and you know I can do it!"

He stopped momentarily and then regained control of himself.

"Major Ashcroft, listen! At least half a dozen times in the last six months I personally have seen Porter forget all orders just to show

off. I've talked with him, and I've pleaded with him. Over at the Marne it's a miracle those pictures weren't lost because he wanted to grandstand. He'd be willing to lose the Allies the war at any minute to get a column in the newspaper. Orders mean no more to him than a silk hat does to a turtle. I don't know what that package is, and I don't know why we're here, but I do know what we were told to do, and I do know that this fat-headed fool went directly against orders, and I don't give a hoot whether he got the balloon or not!"

For a moment there was silence. Porter was literally quivering with rage, and there was fear deep in the eyes of the man who had made himself known in the last six months as the most crazily audacious pilot of the war. The silence was so thick with menace that it was like a tangible, physical entity. Somehow it seemed that no one could speak.

It was Riley, himself, who broke it.

"Major, I'm saying that for the good of this outfit. Furthermore, to give Porter a chance to stay alive, he ought to be put out of it right now."

The words came from the Texan as though each one was wrested bodily from him. He well knew how much being a member of the crack outfit of the Allies meant to the portly

little flyer—and yet he had turned into a flying madman who could not possibly last much longer. A dozen times he had endangered the success of the vitally important missions that had been assigned to the outfit on all the fronts of the war, apparently to satisfy a conceit which had grown more overwhelming with every passing month.

As that indictment fell from Riley's ashen lips the major's eyes turned toward Porter.

"You told me," he said crisply, "that the combat could not be avoided. This is the last straw, Porter."

He stopped for a minute and passed his hand across his forehead wearily. The major had changed somewhat since the time two months before when he, too, had been a species of lunatic whom general headquarters had temporarily taken off flying duty. The major had been a flying iceberg to whom the lives of others meant as little as his own condemned existence did to him. Sometimes Rud wondered whether that last glorious wreck of Ashcroft's had not knocked him back to normality. He seemed older and more tolerant these days, as though he had suddenly come to himself.

It was the new Major Ashcroft, with sympathy in his level voice and pity in his eyes, who went on:

"Porter, I'm sorry, but for the present you will not fly any more on missions assigned to this outfit. Pending your replacement by someone else and your own assignment to some squadron, you may consider yourself on leave. I think on this particular mission we can dispense with the services of the fourth ship."

Somehow Rud expected the little flyer to crumple under those words. As Fitz-Carson's eyes dropped as though in pity and big Gordon turned away, Rud himself was unable to take his eyes away from his former friend. Time after time in private he had tried to reason with him, only to be rebuffed.

But Porter did not crumple. His lips twisted in a snarl as he fairly flung himself at the door.

"All right. I'm done with all of you!" he spat viciously. "Who's knocked down more ships than anybody else in this outfit? Who's never been shot down? Who always came back with what he was after when there was a chance? Sore because I got some publicity, are you? Well, I can outfly and outfight any one of you; and before you get rid of me you are going to have a battle on your hands. I'll take your orders because I've got to, Major. Trying to give somebody what you got yourself, are you? A fine C.O. you are——"

It was Rud's fist which crashed to the jaw of

the hysterical young flyer and dropped him as unconscious as a log. There were tears in Riley's eyes as he lifted him to the bunk.

"Balmy, eh what?" Fitz-Carson said coolly.

"It was the only thing to do," came Gordon's gruff tones. "There's no doubt he's been going cuckoo the last few months, and I don't know why."

"Now that I think back on it," the major said slowly, "I remember Porter always being sore during the number of times when his services weren't necessary and he was left at home. He seems to have generated a mad desire to show how good he is."

Riley, new lines in his face and a haunted look in his eyes, said simply:

"It's got to be a disease with him. I've heard him tell many people that he was the greatest flyer in the world, and then he goes out and tries to prove it. It just isn't natural."

"There is no room for a man who is out for himself in this war," the major said incisively. "Now, gentlemen, regarding our presence on this boat. There are seaplanes aboard but what our duty is to be I can't state exactly. I do not even know what is in that package, Riley——"

"It's the newest, most efficient, longest range

and most reliable radio outfit so far constructed," Gordon interrupted.

Riley, startled, looked at him quickly and for a moment forgot the unconscious figure in the bunk. One time, after a series of almost unexplainable events, Gordon had confided in him that he had other duties than flying—

"How do you know?" Riley asked involuntarily.

Gordon shrugged his shoulders.

"You might as well know," he said casually, "I——"

"Gordon!"

It was a crisp command from the major.

Gordon threw up one hand in a casual gesture of dismissal.

"O.K., Major," he said, in the manner of a man who gives in to the whim of a child.

"Have you any information as to what our mission is?" the major went on coolly.

Riley slumped back on the bed. For the moment there was a sort of resentment within, for he felt that Fitz-Carson also knew whatever position Gordon held in the Allied cause but it died aborning. He had matured a great deal during the last year and much of his egotism had been burned out of him.

"No, but I have a hunch it's important. More important than a good many of our as-

signments," Gordon said gruffly. He ran his hand through his mane of short, upstanding hair.

"It's the radio this time, and not a camera, so it's scouting of some sort. Maybe the fleets are going to tie up. Who can tell?"

If Gordon couldn't, it appeared that no one could. But Rud, for one, did not devote a great deal of time wondering about it.

Even when the next day Major Ashcroft called them together and said simply each of the ships was prepared for four three-hundred-pound bombs, Rud was more conscious of the fact that Pudgy was not there than he was of what the major was saying.

He did not exchange a word with Porter during the next twenty-four hours, nor, so far as he knew, did any of the flyers; and yet it seemed that the spirit of the little Canadian was always alongside of him. Dozens of times on deck or in the dining salon he saw the little airman, but never did they speak. Pudgy looked at him with hard eyes and sneering lips, and when he had the opportunity he made a snarling remark to whoever was near him.

Once in a while Rud could overhear him talking in loud tones and his subject was always the same—Pudgy Porter and the exact reasons why he was the greatest flyer of the war. He

was whistling to keep his courage up. Yet Rud had a stubborn knowledge that his harsh procedure had been one hundred per cent right.

The second night aboard he got no sleep whatever. The *Engadine* was part of the battle cruiser division of the Grand Fleet under Admiral Beatty, and the air of suppressed excitement which he discerned in the air of the officers and men of the vessel gradually communicated itself to him.

The principal reason for his tramping the deck most of the night, however, was that the very presence of Porter seemed to poison the air for him. He felt himself skulking away to avoid meeting his enemy, for all the world as though he was the one who had been wrong.

The heaving North Sea and the blinking lights of the cruisers ordinarily would have made his blood surge with the romance of new surroundings and prospective action. Instead of that it was a worn-out, nerve-frayed young flyer who appeared at breakfast with blood-shot eyes and pale face and after the meal threw himself in his bunk and relapsed into the sleep of the dead.

CHAPTER VIII

PROTECTING THE FLEET

WHEN Rud awoke, he started from his bed as though coming out of a nightmare. For a moment his dazed brain could not comprehend what was happening. It seemed as though all hell had broken loose. Shattering explosions came so fast they were like the roll of some giant drum and he had flung half of his clothes on before he comprehended the fact that the battle of Jutland was on.

He had just finished dressing when Fitz-Carson entered the door. The Englishman was as calm and immaculate as though he was calling to fulfill a luncheon engagement.

"Bit of a row," he observed. "We let you sleep as long as possible. Orders are to stand by now."

"What's the lay?" Rud asked jerkily as he got into his shirt.

"For the next few minutes," Fitz-Carson started casually, "Beatty's division has got to fight the whole German fleet. Jellicoe will be along soon with the big ships, and the old boy

had better jolly well hurry, if I'm any judge."

"What time is it?" asked Rud.

"Almost six," Fitz-Carson told him, studying his nails calmly. "You had a bit of a nap."

Rud did not stop to think of the fact that only years of exposure to continuous gunfire could have enabled him to sleep through the bedlam without.

As he tumbled out on deck, he felt a peculiar sense of helplessness. The sea was dark and rough, and it seemed to him that the *Engadine* was like a frail chip, entirely incapable of lasting through the ordeal of battle.

He could see but little from the deck as the smoke obscured his vision, but he had an impression of a seemingly endless line of German ships about two thousand yards away.

He joined Ashcroft, Gordon, and Fitz-Carson up at the bow. Talking amidships was Porter. Riley stared at him and he scarcely heard Major Ashcroft as he said:

"We've only got ten battle cruisers and four battleships. Jellicoe had better hurry."

"They say there's a dirigible up there for the Germans," Gordon said in his deep bass "I wonder when we get under way."

The airmen relapsed into silence as the battle raged on. Conversation was almost impossible. As a matter of fact, Rud felt no desire to in-

dulge in it. Somehow he wished he could go back and talk to Porter.

Suddenly it seemed as if a new lease on life had come to the men of the *Engadine*. The radio apparatus began to sputter and crackle and like magic the word spread. "Jellicoe is here."

One by one the lordly vessels of the main British battle fleet took shape below the lowering smoke and mist. It was then that an orderly rushed up to the airmen.

"Message for Mr. Gordon," the pale-faced youth said swiftly, and thrust the flimsy paper into Gordon's hand.

Gordon scanned it quickly.

"We're off," he said in his deep, vibrant voice, "and, Major, we'd better use Porter."

"Just as you say," the major snapped back. "Get him!"

Suddenly such electric excitement had Rud in its grip that he was scarcely capable of coherent thought. A moment later Porter, pale, but coldly defiant, had joined them. His thoughts were as plain as though he had spoken them.

"Had to give in," he seemed to be saying, and there was nothing but hate in his eyes for them all.

As though by magic seaplanes had appeared

on the decks of the *Engadine*, and the first one was being lowered over the side.

Ashcroft conferred briefly with Gordon.

"All right, gentlemen," he said quickly. "The radio is in the first ship which Gordon and I will use. Your duty is to protect us as well as to pick up any information you can. You have four three-hundred-pound bombs apiece. Not one is to be dropped without a signal from me. Just what is expected by the high command I do not know. Just one more thing. That dirigible is heavily armed. In the event that none of you know it, I may say that it would be almost impossible to shoot it down, because of its many gas bags. We are not in the air to bother it, but to get as much information as we can, remember that."

Three young naval flyers who were to act as bombers were standing by as Rud and his comrades reached the side of the boat.

"Glad you're with us, Pudgy," Rud heard himself saying.

"Mind your own business!"

Less than five minutes later Rud, in charge of the last of the heavy seaplanes, was sending his craft zipping through the heaving billows of the North Sea and finally got it into the air.

He circled upward through the smoke of battle and finally, at three thousand feet, as he

slid into his place in the formation behind the major, he got his first opportunity to observe what was happening.

Never to his dying day would he forget his first sight of the battle which was to sink twenty-eight fighting ships and kill and wound almost ten thousand men.

The German fleet had turned south toward its base and the entire British fleet was in pursuit.

He saw explosion after explosion, some from internal reasons and some from torpedoes. The great fourteen-inch guns seemed to explode periodically as great belches of flame came from their mouths.

On one side was the great line of German battleships, on the other the English vessels stretched out in single file in battle formation. Between these two lines were the battle cruisers in their swift maneuvers and attacks. In between these were the fast destroyers dashing back and forth like so many swift water bugs launching torpedoes at the larger ships and using their deck guns.

He saw one lordly German ship which seemed to be blown up as if by some gigantic bomb and then disappear, sucking under hundreds of its own crew as it disappeared beneath the waves.

On and on they flew, circling above that cross section of hell beneath them, and somehow Rud was quiet and awed at that horribly majestic sight.

Was the German fleet on the run because it had turned back toward its base, or was there some deep-laid strategy in its movements?

His eyes roved the sea ceaselessly and in the leading seaplane he saw the major working continuously at his radio, relaying information to the half-blinded thousands below.

He was aware of the hovering German dirigible two miles or more away, and for once an enemy aircraft seemed unimportant. As his wide eyes swept the scene below they suddenly froze to one German ship. For a full minute he watched it and with all the recollections, humorous, horrid and haunting, which were to be his mental residue of the war that one was destined to stand out in clearest outline.

All of her guns were disabled except one small gun on her forward deck. Most of her crew, dead or badly wounded, were sprawled on her decks. But down this great line of fighting ships she steamed, her rigging down and the few men remaining of her crew standing by that one pitiful small gun, firing it as fast as they could. She was the target of all the British ships as she passed down the line.

Englishmen on the decks of their ships stopped and cheered the spectacle as it passed them, although their own guns were firing on her. Finally, indomitable to the last, she went down, and there were hot tears in Rud's eyes as he suddenly thought furiously:

"What foolishness all this is!"

Then all that he had seen was wiped from his mind as he caught the signal from the major and his eyes strained ahead and to the left of the German column of ships. There could be no doubt about those dark specks on the surface of the water.

"U-boats," he thought swiftly, and in obedience to the major's signal he swung his ship toward them.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the dirigible speeding toward the same objective as though to protect it.

In a flash it appeared to him that the whole strategy of the Germans was written in the water for all to read. Shielded by the passing German fleet the boats would submerge completely at the proper time, go underneath both fleets and attack the English ships from the rear.

Already the major must be sending word down of what they had discovered.

With surprise he noticed that he, along with

Porter and Fitz-Carson, was in a terrific dive toward the U-boats.

How heavily armed was that dirigible which was sailing majestically toward the same goal?

He could not stop to think about that. He turned and found his bomber ready. Those specks were but a thousand feet ahead and a thousand feet below them now and seemed unconscious of the seaplanes. Their periscopes were concentrated on the surface battle.

It was just then that Pudgy Porter's ship dropped all four of its bombs at once. The next second Porter's seaplane had zoomed upward just as Fitz-Carson's ship, speeding across the nest of U-boats, seemed to stagger and then leveled itself.

The dirigible, from a height of about twelve thousand feet and barely five hundred feet to one side, seemed to develop into an aerial fort. From along the sides of its control cabin a half dozen streams of fire stabbed the atmosphere at once and Fitz-Carson's ship was hit and hit badly.

Rud hurled his ship across the rapidly disappearing U-boats. He was dimly aware of the fact that Porter was somewhere close to the dirigible but his attention was concentrated on his objective below.

He felt his ship bound upward as his bomber released the twelve hundred pounds of weight which hung below it. He could hear the whine of the German bullets above the roar of his motor and suddenly he had the helpless feeling that there was no escape from that aerial barrage.

He banked and twisted back to get out of the rain of missiles, but instinctively he knew that the fire from at least half a dozen smaller cannons or machine guns was following him.

He looked around fearfully, as if exposing himself to greater danger, and then he fairly froze into immobility as he saw what was happening.

Fitz-Carson was flapping weakly toward the water. His own left wing was torn by bullets and his observer was unconscious, in the back seat. But on a course which carried him at an angle straight alongside the dirigible, Pudgy Porter, in a plane which seemed barely hanging together, was trying to hold the fort. In front of the very mouths of the dirigible guns he flew, and his own machine guns were raking it fore and aft with their fire.

The dirigible barrage ceased as the great craft shuddered all over and then began drifting helplessly in the air, out of control. It

swung away to the south, great rips in its outer cover and with its control cabin half cut to pieces with bullets.

"Fitz-Carson and I and the Navy boys would be dead as doornails now if it wasn't for Pudgy," was the thought that flashed through Riley's brain just as Porter's ship seemed to literally disintegrate. The right wings were merely a twisted mass of linen and wire as the seaplane dropped toward the water, left wing up, with ever-increasing speed. Its nose gradually dropped, and it half side-slipped, half dived toward the water but a few hundred feet below.

Far above them, drifting helplessly before the wind, was the crippled dirigible.

With unwinking eyes Rud followed the course of the doomed plane. How close it was to the water he could not tell when he saw a figure separate itself from the ship and fall end over end into the troubled sea.

In a flash Rud was diving his ship toward the spot where that body had disappeared. The seaplane had hit the water and was now floating upside down, its tail barely visible above the water. Careless of the U-boats, which he knew lurked somewhere beneath the surface, he flashed downward, and as a weakly struggling figure appeared above the surface he was al-

most skimming the waves one hundred yards from him.

The German ships were firing on him now, but he scarcely noticed them. By the grace of God and his own skill he landed his craft safely and taxied it through the heaving billows toward Pudgy. The Germans had not got the range yet, but their fire was zipping the waves in perilous proximity to the airmen as Porter hauled himself aboard and collapsed weakly.

"How about your observer?" Rud bellowed above the throbbing motors and the din of the combat.

"Dead the minute after he dropped his bombs," were the words formed by Porter's lips, and then Rud took off.

The seaplane limped back to the *Engadine*, and fifteen minutes later the three of them were hauled aboard. The men of the *Engadine* were not too busy to give them a quick slap on the shoulder and the captain said gruffly:

"Those U-boats would have been our finish. Eh, what?"

"Yes, sir," Rud said mechanically, and then: "Pudgy, neither Fitz-Carson nor I would have lasted through. I know that."

Porter was transfigured. Gone was the savage resentment of the past two days and it

seemed that the past was wiped completely from his mind.

"I'll say!" he chattered, happily. "Didn't I give that dirigible plenty of trouble? Let's have a smoke!"

He told about how he had given the dirigible trouble until Rud was inclined to think that he made more noise than the battle itself. And perhaps it was because he felt he had justified himself once and for all, and proved his right to be called the greatest of flyers that he never thereafter, during the career of the Phantom Five, did any grandstanding to furnish additional proof.

CHAPTER IX

A SPY!

IT WAS months later, months which had turned Rud into one of the finest flying men in the world, when the day came which was to see the start of one of the Phantom Fives' most amazing adventures. At the moment when the thing really began he was hunched forward tensely over his stick, his eyes darting around the sky unceasingly. It did not seem possible that the Phantom Five could be flying back toward their own lines over German territory without running into a single German plane.

Ahead of him Major Ashcroft and Gordon, in the two-seated photographic plane, were drumming steadily ahead, and a thousand feet above them Fitz-Carson, the Englishman, was standing guard. Rud himself was a thousand yards in the rear of the two-seater which was carrying the priceless photographs, and five hundred feet lower was little Porter.

For two years now those five men had flown that formation on dozens of special missions,

and in a large percentage of cases the cargo in that two-seater had been as valuable as it was now. The Phantom Five were sent usually only on missions where failure would make a great deal of difference to the Allied cause.

There had grown up in Riley a tremendous pride in that special flying squadron. It was as though the five men had been fused into one machine, and the fact that they had lived and almost died together so many times seemed to have made them, as though by magic, a single unit. It was deeper and more intangible than friendship—in fact, Rud was as far from personal intimacy with Fitz-Carson and Ashcroft as he had been the day the specially picked flyers had been gathered together.

However, there was something there that the lean, red-headed pilot had never met with before in his twenty-five years of life. Each one of those men had stood the ordeal by fire and there was a deep, abiding confidence in each other and the special abilities of each which transcended anything that Rud had ever known. He was certain that each one of those men would lay down his life without a qualm to get those pictures home.

Suddenly these thoughts, the more pleasant because of the taut ordeal which would not be over until they had landed safely, swept

from his mind. Four thousand feet above them, coming down in a beautiful formation dive, were five Fokkers. They were diving like aerial projectiles through a large hole in the wispy clouds, and they were bound for the Allied ships.

Rud gave his ship the gun frantically as he rocked it to warn Porter. He must get ahead and warn Fitz-Carson and Gordon in the event that they had not seen the menace sweeping down on them from above——

But they had.

“Catch Fitz-Carson or Gordon napping,” Rud thought, as his heart started to pound like a steam engine and the blood to surge more swiftly through his veins.

Swiftly the three Nieuports gathered to meet the attack as the major and Gordon roared steadily onward.

The Phantom Five had a carefully worked out scheme to meet an attack like that.

All thought was blotted temporarily from the Texan's mind then as his gaze rested on a single ship which had darted out of the clouds as though materializing from the air. It was an Allied scout, a Nieuport. It was just above the diving Fokkers and without hesitation the lone airman took after them.

They were a quarter of a mile north of the

Phantom Five and probably a thousand feet higher. Had they seen the single threat on their tail?

Riley momentarily forgot himself and fairly held his breath in tense anticipation as he saw that Allied scout dive as few ships had ever dived before. It did not seem that frail linen and wood could stand the strain as the tiny Nieuport dropped like a bullet.

He could not see the shots, but suddenly he gave a shout of mingled admiration and exultation as he saw what happened. The two Fokkers closest to the lone airman faltered in their dives one after the other. Then one of them started spinning downward slowly, and the other one commenced to slip and skid and stagger toward the ground as though its pilot was only half conscious and could control his ship only at intervals.

An instant later the three remaining Fokkers, momentarily forgetful of the prey they had started for, turned to meet the attack. Rud watched in wondering awe as the Nieuport hurtled squarely into the center of its trio of enemies. Then there followed five seconds of as wild an aerial scramble as he had ever seen.

Now Fitz-Carson, Porter, and he were hurrying toward the scene, but before they had fairly started another Fokker was flashing

earthward in a nose dive. A second afterwards, the two remaining Boche were diving back toward safety rather than face the uneven odds.

Almost as one the three Nieuports turned back toward Ashcroft's ship. It was not for them to conduct an abortive chase even though potting two Fokkers was almost a certainty. Their duty was to protect Ashcroft.

"What a flyer!" Rud breathed.

Those three Fokkers had been knocked off within a space of thirty seconds, but it was the manner in which it had been done which made the feat more impressive than the result itself. Never had he seen an airman who had expressed such utter abandon, plus wizard-like control of his craft, as that pilot had. The Nieuport had been like a flashing rapier of the air—a blade wielded by a master.

"I wish we were going to get that bird instead of Shaffer!" he thought to himself involuntarily, and that was high praise.

Just that morning they had been notified by Major Ashcroft that for special duty which lay ahead of them, in the next few days, Shaffer, a member of the Lafayette Escadrille with fifteen planes to his credit, would work with them.

The unknown pilot was not chasing the Germans but was flying at an angle which at the

speed he was going would intersect the course of the Phantom Five. They were safely over the Allied lines now, bound for the airdrome. Rud watched the oncoming ship with considerable interest, not in the ship itself so much as in the huge figure which gradually resolved itself before his eyes.

The pilot had goggles on, but he wore no helmet. Yet it was far from warm even at that twelve thousand foot altitude and a little higher up, where pursuit work was largely done, the September air was positively frigid.

In a moment the lone airman had joined the formation, throttling his racing motor to a speed which would keep him beside them. He was a mountain of a man, and Rud got an impression of flashing, white teeth which contrasted startlingly with the pilot's oil-grimed face. He looked like some laughing superman of the sky as he waved cheerily and then proceeded to fly alongside them as though he were a member of the outfit. He brought his Nieuport to rest on the airdrome in a perfect landing and followed the battle-scarred ships up to the line. He was last on the line and as he vaulted out of the cockpit he was met by the Phantom Five with cordiality and curiosity.

Major Ashcroft, tall and spare, was the first to speak. His glowing, black eyes, so start-

lingly in contrast to his pallid face, seemed more alive than usual as they rested on the blond giant before him.

"Excellent work, sir," he said in his meticulous way. "I am Major Ashcroft."

"Glad to know you," grinned the stranger. "My name's Shaffer."

"What!" yelled Pudgy Porter, and even the sandy-haired Fitz-Carson deigned to pluck at his mustache at a slightly increased tempo as his bored, fishy-looking eyes inspected the stranger.

Gordon's rugged face lightened surprisingly, and the impulsive Riley found himself saying:

"Welcome to our city!"

Major Ashcroft's unhealthy pallor seemed to redden slightly as those eyes, which were like windows in a pallid mask, flickered over the giant of a man before him. He smoothed the gray hair at his temples abstractedly, and it was as though he was trying to probe the last recesses in the new arrival's character in one moment. The major, who had received his death warrant already from an old wound, was a man of one idea.

"Not Sergeant Shaffer of the Lafayette Escadrille?" he asked precisely.

Shaffer glanced down at his nondescript clothes.

"The very same," he grinned and from his trousers pocket he produced a crumpled batch of papers.

The major looked at them absently as his subordinates inspected Shaffer with mounting interest.

The whole-souled Riley found himself liking the stranger more with every second. He was at least six feet three with a pair of shoulders like a wrestler, and a barrel-like chest which tapered off into the slim hips and long legs of the natural athlete. Above that superb torso his square face was the setting for wide set eyes which were as blue as the southern seas. His blond hair was thick and stood up on his head as though there was too much vitality in it to allow it to lie down smoothly. It was wavy and tangled from the rush of the propeller wash, and somehow it seemed to express the same utter abandonment of spirit which Shaffer had indicated in his flying.

In repose, as now, that face of his had a certain grimness which was intensified by the rather narrow eyes and the lines from his nostrils to the ends of his wide mouth, but when he smiled his whole being seemed to express a jovial enjoyment of life.

The major nodded over the papers.

"You weren't in uniform, so I wondered," he remarked.

Shaffer grinned boyishly.

"As a matter of cold fact," he said, "I only possess one uniform and I ripped the pants of that this morning. The other boys' clothes fit me about as close as a peanut shell would fit my head."

As they walked toward headquarters he dwarfed even Gordon, who was no midget himself. Rud was six feet tall but he had to look up at his beaming fellow American as he drawled:

"That was a swell piece of flying up there! I'm Riley. Hope you like this outfit."

"I know I will," Shaffer assured him.

"How's Slim Botsford?" Rud inquired casually.

Slim was a friend of his in the Escadrille.

Shaffer hesitated, glancing down at Riley briefly with an unreadable look in his eyes. Then:

"Fine," he said heartily.

Riley glanced up at him surprisedly.

"Why, last I heard they didn't know whether he'd get well or not," he said.

"Well, I meant fine, comparatively speaking," Shaffer told him. "When you're bad

off, you're doing well if you hold your own, aren't you?"

Suddenly his gray eyes seemed to hold an icy challenge in them as they bored into Riley's. The impact of the man's personality was like a physical blow.

For no observable reason Rud found himself stammering in embarrassment as he half apologized.

"Oh, I see. Slim's a friend of mine——"

"Yes, I've heard him mention you," Shaffer told him, and it was as though a temporary tension had been relaxed.

He glanced around the teeming airdrome as he remarked.

"The mechanics seem to be busy as ants. Anything special up?"

"Search me," Rud told him. "We work by ourselves, you know, but I think there's a push coming to-morrow that means every ship in the air. We're supposed to be in it, I hear. Some monkey business or other."

They followed the others up the steps of headquarters and a moment later were gathered in the major's office.

Shaffer, who was arrayed comfortably in a woolen O.D. shirt and civilian trousers, was glanced at curiously by the clerks as he strode through the outer office.

"I suppose this is a court-martial offense," he said blithely. "But what's a man to do if he doesn't own a uniform?"

"Pardon me, sir, I forgot to introduce you," the major stated as they entered.

The major often forgot the minor amenities these days, Rud reflected. Never had he seen a man who drove so unceasingly, physically and mentally, toward one goal. No achievement of the Phantom Five meant anything to him—he was always thinking of the next one before it was over.

Preoccupied, tireless, his mental eyes set on some distant goal which it seemed his obsession to reach before he died, he was like an automaton.

"Lieutenant Fitz-Carson, Sergeant Porter, and Lieutenant Gordon——"

"What do you mean Lieutenant Gordon?" Shaffer interrupted with that toothy grin. "Isn't this Lieutenant *Colonel* Gordon of the Military Intelligence?"

For a second blank silence settled down on the office.

Rud Riley was stunned, and little Porter's pug-nosed face was a study. There was a ghost of a smile beneath Fitz-Carson's mouse-colored mustache, and Major Ashcroft was gazing at Shaffer as though paralyzed. Gordon himself,

Rud noticed, glanced upward quickly and then lit a cigarette calmly.

"What makes you think that?" snapped Ashcroft.

"Think it! I believe I know it, sir," Shaffer said surprisingly.

In a flash a thousand memories swarmed in Riley's mind. If that was true, it explained a lot of things that had happened during the last two years. There had been times when Lieutenant Gordon, ostensibly Ashcroft's pilot, had seemed to rule his commanding officer. If Shaffer was right, it would explain the incident of several months before when Major Ashcroft had been practically taken out of command of the Phantom Five because his own sublime disregard of his own life had reached proportions where it marred the chances of many a mission's success.

"Well, we might as well admit it, Major," Gordon said suddenly. "But listen, everybody, I am a Military Intelligence man, and this is a Military Intelligence unit, in a way, but my rank no more entitles me to command here than if I was a doctor. Understand that, everybody."

His heavy bass reverberated in the little room, and there was the ring of command about it.

"Sure," Shaffer said heartily. "In a way, boys and girls, I'm in the same boat. The United States is interested in what's going on too, even though we aren't in it. Oh, not that I'm anything else than I am supposed to be, don't get me wrong about that," he smiled infectiously. "I'm not going to pull any general's stars on you. I'm lucky to be a sergeant. But if I ask a few questions or seem to be smelling around don't get me wrong. I'll show you some other papers when we have time and my baggage gets here."

Gordon nodded.

"I figured there was some reason why you should be sent to join us," he stated. "Hello, looks as if this was meant for me."

He picked up two long envelopes from the desk and as he looked at the second one handed it to Ashcroft. "One for you, too, Major," he said, and ripped open his own.

His eyes had scarcely rested on the sheet of paper it contained than a blistering curse dropped from the major's lips like a hot coal.

"The fools!" he said. "Oh, the utter fools!"

His heavy face was sullen, and his brown eyes were like two red coals in his head as he began to pace up and down the office like a caged bear.

"What's the matter?" Shaffer asked, his

eyes suddenly as cold as two pieces of ice.

The major was staring at his paper silently.

"The attack comes two days from now, and they are just going to try them out," Gordon raged. "We're supposed to spot a few tough machine gun nests if you please and photograph them—so they can try them out!"

His scorn was sublime. His big fists were clinched and it was as though he would be glad to rend somebody limb from limb.

"Try what out?" Shaffer inquired.

It did not occur to Rud then to notice the utter assurance with which the stranger made himself a part of the outfit. There was no shrinking from the spotlight because he was a new man.

"Good Lord!" Gordon went on, ignoring Shaffer's question and addressing Ashcroft. "If we've got anything, three-quarters of its value will be in taking the Germans by surprise and using their surprise and disorganization to the fullest extent. Why try out a few that can't do much damage and will prepare the Germans for a real attack?"

"It seems to me you are right," Ashcroft told him icily. "The same mistake the Germans made when they tried out poison gas in a small way."

"Well, I'm still waiting to know what this

is all about," Shaffer informed them with a grin.

"Funny as it may seem," barked Gordon, "I can't tell you, yet."

"Personally I don't give a hoot," stated Fitz-Carson. "This war's getting to be a bit of a bore so far as I'm concerned."

"When do we do this machine gun spotting and where?" queried Porter, too accustomed to mystery to have it weigh on his mind. "I've got plans for this evening if I don't have to get up in the middle of the night."

"Day after to-morrow," Ashcroft said. "You all have new ships to try out to-morrow. That will be all, gentlemen. Riley, fix Sergeant Shaffer up with quarters and anything else he needs."

Without a word the men filed out, all except the raging Gordon.

"Well, I'll be glad to get rid of that crippled crate of mine," stated Porter with satisfaction. "It's got more holes in it than a sieve. I don't know how I keep it in the air."

"Nobody but the great Pudgy Porter could," Rud told him affectionately.

"Well, you don't notice me missing many Boche," bragged Porter, who was totally irrepressible on the subject of his own flying. "Let's go over to my place and visit."

Which was done. In fact it was still being done at midnight that night, due largely to the infectious personality of Shaffer.

Shaffer as far as Pudgy and Rud were concerned was "one of the whites." Rud seemed to sense in him the "buddy" whom he had not found, as yet, in the Phantom Five.

Shaffer seemed to feel the same way about it. The two breakfasted together, and as Rud went out to the line to test the shining new Nieuport which was to replace his battle-scarred veteran Shaffer was with him.

"See you in the air," Shaffer grinned. "They say that number seven down there is my future boat."

He made off down the line with long strides as Rud replaced the mechanic in his own plane and proceeded to tune up the motor while the tires pressed against the wheel blocks, and the mechanics held the eager little ship down. Satisfied with the instrument readings he taxied out on the field and gave it the gun.

The little ship scudded across the frost-bitten ground, its motor humming sweetly, and as he eased it into the air he was tingling with the thrill which never would leave him where flying was concerned.

Out of sheer good spirits, he held the Nieu-

port close to the ground, its motor wide open, while he gathered speed for a zoom which would carry him over the hangars at the lower end of the field.

He was fifty yards from them and was just about to pull back on his stick when his heart seemed to stop beating and every muscle in his body tensed. Without a sign of warning the motor simply coughed and sputtered and died as the little scout hurled itself straight for those hangars.

Automatically Rud pulled back on the stick and the Nieuport, its flying speed dropping with deadly swiftness, answered momentarily. He barely topped the hangar ahead of him, and then pushed forward on the stick in an effort to conserve what speed he had left.

For a moment the Nieuport seemed to hover fifteen feet above the hangar roof. Behind the hangar were several smaller sheds and rough territory—a wreck was certain.

He felt his undercarriage hit the further edge of the hangar roof, and there was a sickening squashing sensation. Then, as though that hard bump had jarred something in the motor, it went on again as though touched by a master hand, and suddenly all cylinders were firing as sweetly as they had been on the take-off.

"Plug in the gas line somewhere—jarred loose," thought Rud as a wave of relief swept over him.

He wondered what had happened to his undercarriage as he turned the scout around and scudded back over the field, and it did not take him long to find out that his ordeal was far from over. A dozen men were gesticulating wildly at him and two of them were pointing to the undercarriage of a ship on the line.

"Mashed it sure as thunder!" he thought to himself grimly.

Again he came back over the field and this time two mechanics were throwing wheels into the air—that meant that both of his wheels were out of commission.

He tried to think of some body of water that he could land in, but there was none and landing his Nieuport without an undercarriage was as pleasant a prospect as muzzling a working machine gun.

Rud was white and tense as he circled the field and prepared himself for the crash.

Ten miles west, two Allied balloons hung lazily in the sky. If he only had one of their parachutes—

His wide eyes froze to a two-seated ship that was leaving the ground. Could it be possible that they were bearing some message to him,

he wondered. Any excuse was welcome to postpone the moment when he would have to send the Nieuport down and crash, so he waited like a drowning man grasping for a straw.

The man in the back seat was waving to him, that was certain, and as the ship came closer he realized that it was Shaffer. Porter was the pilot.

Rud was about a thousand feet high, flying in endless circles around the airdrome as the two-seated DeHaviland came alongside of him. Shaffer, his blonde hair blowing in the wind, stood up in the back seat and held up a parachute.

There were some balloon parachutes at the airdrome, Rud knew, but what good did that 'chute do him? Nevertheless, he felt a gleam of hope, born of desperation as he strove to comprehend Shaffer's signals.

They seemed to indicate that he was to fly straight and level. What did the big fellow have in mind? He watched him climb out of his seat, the parachute flopping on a string from his belt, and then as casually as though he was in a gymnasium the newest member of the Phantom Five hung by his hands over space and drew himself hand over hand to the lower wing of the DeHaviland. From there he went to the leading edge, the deadly propeller whirl-

ing within two feet of him and let himself down until he was hanging once more by his hands.

An instant later, as effortlessly as though he did it every day, he had reached the undercarriage and was sitting on the spreader bar gesturing to Rud.

He scarcely realized yet what was going to happen as he obediently throttled his motor and flew straight and level above the airdrome.

The DeHaviland, under Porter's skillful hand, eased closer and closer to him until it was directly above him and the propeller was whirling only inches from the tail of the Nieuport. Shaffer was grinning down at him from the spreader bar, leaning casually forward against the propeller wash. Now the big flyer was barely ten feet over his head.

Rud caught his breath in startled surprise as Shaffer seemed to fall off the undercarriage.

In an instant he was hanging head downward from the spreader bar, his ankles locked together above it. The parachute tumbled downward on a rope five or six feet long and dangled tantalizingly above Riley's head.

Then the DeHaviland mashed downward as Rud unloosened his belt and stood up. His clutching hands gathered the pack into his hand. Shaffer, grinning a wide and whole-souled grin, swung easily upward to his perch.

Rud subsided limply in his seat, and regained control of his ship. His mind was a daze as he awkwardly adjusted the 'chute while he kept the Nieuport in a climb by holding the stick between his knees. For the moment a parachute jump seemed nothing compared to the vast relief of escaping that wheel-less landing.

At three thousand feet over the airdrome, however, the jump itself became far from a picnic as he contemplated it. There was a horrible fear in his heart as he made sure that his ship would not fall where it would do any damage, and then stood up in his seat. He was pale as a ghost as he cut the ignition, and the doomed scout hovered lazily in the air. His blue-gray eyes were tightly closed as he literally fell over the side of the ship, and he gave an uncontrollable gasp as he felt himself tumbling in space.

Then it seemed that a great peace settled over him. Somehow he never doubted that the 'chute would open.

It did, and it was a transfigured flyer who swung downward in great arcs, his lean, brown face aglow, and his long arms semaphoring presumably humorous messages to the two-seater which circled around him as he dropped.

Ten minutes later, a slight limp the only memoir of his landing; he was greeting Shaffer

and Porter at the edge of the airdrome opposite from the hangars.

"Thanks, Shafe," he said simply.

"Don't mention it!" grinned Shaffer heartily. "Hop aboard and we'll taxi you over!"

"Say, it was a tough job getting that thing to you!" Porter yelled from the front seat. "Never was there a tougher flying job than that one!"

Which same statement he repeated during most of that day, until Shaffer's part of the feat seemed a minor one. Nevertheless, Rud, mulling it over in his mind, realized more deeply every hour what a risk Shaffer had taken for him. It was not alone the acrobatics concerned. As the Texan thought of the big airman's head hanging within inches of the Nieuport's flaying propeller, and the million and one things which could have happened to bring disaster, there was but one conclusion to come to, and that was what he told the bunch as they gathered in headquarters on a quick summons from the major. Shaffer had not yet arrived.

"Our new recruit did himself proud this morning," Gordon remarked as Rud entered.

"Yes, sir," Rud replied, and it seemed that that "sir" had slipped out without conscious

thought. "He risked his life to save mine. That's what it amounts to."

Gordon nodded. To Major Ashcroft it seemed that the incident was too minor to even pay any attention to.

"Here he comes," Gordon said as Shaffer entered. "Congratulations, Shaffer. Sorry I couldn't stay around to see your act up there."

"Oh, let's forget it. Glad to help out," laughed Shaffer, but to Riley there came a warm glow as the blond flyer's eyes rested on his with a look in their depths that seemed to mean that he was particularly glad that he had been of service to Rud Riley.

"All right, gentlemen. Come in, Mr. Porter. Now that we're all here, there's no time to lose."

It was Ashcroft speaking. He had not waited ten seconds after Porter's entrance had made the gang complete. The major was standing behind his desk, immaculate from head to foot, smoothing his small black mustache.

"We take off immediately for a little field a short distance back of the front," he went on crisply, his eyes on the paper in his hand. "The situation is this: To-morrow morning the Allied army try out a new weapon of war known as a tank. This instrument is a moving for-

tress, so constructed that it can presumably travel over any sort of terrain and make its way through most obstacles, carrying guns, and protecting its operators. They will be camouflaged, and will be used in the morrow's attack on Courcellette and Flers. These cities are a little north of the Somme, between Albert and Bapaume.

"Our job is to secure accurate and detailed pictures of their progress and effect, and to act as general utility machine gun spotters and guides, by way of radio, of their march. We start at dawn. Other Allied planes will be there, but we act independently and the pictures are the main thing. My plane will be guarded by other Allied planes as well as by you gentlemen. Needless to say, though, you will be depended on to see that the pictures get safely back."

"Just what are these tanks?" Shaffer boomed.

"A new wrinkle, I think a marvelous one in its possibilities," Gordon cut in heavily. "But I'll be shot if I don't think its idiotic to 'try them out.' Not enough to do anything important, and all the effect of the surprise lost. Their first attack should be in huge numbers, instead of forewarning the Germans with a few that'll put them wise!"

Question after question, most of them from Shaffer, was hurled at Gordon and the major, and it was Gordon who answered them all. He appeared to know every detail of construction of the tanks, and as the six men trooped out to their already warming airplanes they knew a great deal about tanks.

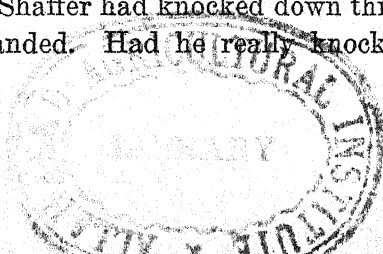
Rud stopped at airdrome headquarters for a few seconds to say good-by to Potty Bates. Potty was off on a mission, it appeared. Searching for something to write a note on, Riley's eyes fell on a piece of paper on which was a list of names. "Air Service officers killed in action, week of September —, 1916," was the heading, and a name seemed to leap forth from it as though written in letters of fire.

"Sergeant Richard Shaffer, Lafayette Escadrille."

For a moment Rud was like a man turned to stone. Then, as he fairly groped his way to the line—he was to fly his old ship—he was telling himself scornfully:

"If I had a franc for every mistake on the casualty lists, I could pay for the war!"

Killed in action, that list had said, and the location, even, was given, not fifteen miles from the spot where Shaffer had knocked down three Huns single handed. Had he really knocked them down?



"What a jackass I am!" he flayed himself, and as his eyes met those of the man who had saved his life a wave of shame swept over him.

Somehow, though, as the formation drummed along toward its temporary base, his thoughts would not let him alone. Ridiculous as the idea seemed, it would not leave him. When Slim Botsford had been mentioned, there had been a certain hesitancy on Shaffer's part.

"Why, he's done more in a day than most Allied flyers have done in a month!" the miserable Riley told himself, but nevertheless, the iron in him had been turned to steel by war, and as he landed in the twilight on the tiny field which was to be their base till dawn he had decided what he would do.

The outfit ate with an SOS outfit near by, and it was on the way back to its ships that Riley found himself walking alongside Shaffer. They were barely an eighth of a mile from the abandoned house on the edge of the field where the flyers were to bivouac that night.

Rud slowed his pace—they were in the rear of the others—as he drawled:

"Shafe, I don't want to be sentimental, but the more I think of you hanging up there——"

"Oh, cut that stuff." And Shaffer burst into song as follows:

There was a gosh darn spider,
Crawled up a gosh darn spout,
There came a gosh darn thunderstorm
And washed the darned thing out.
The gosh darn sun came out again——

"I've heard Slim Botsford sing that," Rud interrupted awkwardly. "Learn it from him?"

Shaffer nodded absently.

Slim Botsford, one of Rud's closest friends, had never sung that song in his life.

"I often think of Slim," Rud went on with ashen lips and eyes that were like two coals in his head. Every nerve in his body seemed to be leaping within him. "How that collection of skin and bones ever survived so much shooting up is beyond me. He could wear a length of pipe for an overcoat."

"I'll say. Never saw a guy so thin. But he'll be O.K."

Slim Botsford of the Lafayette Escadrille was so named because he was as roly-poly a little fat man as ever squeezed his way into a ship.

For a second or two Rud could barely think. Shaffer knew no more about Slim Botsford than that stone along the road. And Shaffer was no more Shaffer of the Escadrille than Rud himself was——

As though warned by some sixth sense, Shaffer stopped in his tracks, and suddenly his eyes were burning down into Riley's. The Texan's thoughts were written in his eyes for all to read, evidently. Without the slightest warning, Shaffer's hand moved with the speed of a striking rattler. A red ball of fire seem to burst before Riley's eyes, and he dropped like a log in the darkness.

Shaffer disappeared with long strides, after one look at the motionless figure at the side of the pitted road.

For what seemed like an age Rud fought to regain the use of his faculties. He could scarcely move, and it was as though every muscle was paralyzed. It was a half a minute before he could crawl to his feet, and start at a stumbling run down the road. As the cobwebs cleared from his brain it seemed that it worked automatically, working things out.

"This bird knocked down Shaffer, got his ship some way, and took a chance! No wonder he had no uniform. Stole Shaffer's papers——"

Suddenly the noise-filled night was shattered with a new and louder sound cutting through the rumbling undertones of war. It was an airplane motor, almost wide open, and on the ground. Shaffer was stealing a ship to take off.

"Shaffer's a spy!" gasped Rud as Porter

and Fitz-Carson joined Gordon and the major. In a few words Rud spilled his story.

"Everybody on the line—we can overtake that DeHaviland!" snapped the major, and five men were racing toward the line, Rud in the lead.

One of a group of six mechanics was running to meet them. Shaffer was in the air now, circling ever higher above the airdrome, but apparently without any intention of starting for the lines.

"I just got wise when he tells me before taking off to tell you not to take off, or he'd shoot you down!" gulped the mechanic. "I thought he was all right."

"Taking no chances of us overtaking him," Gordon interrupted harshly. "He's up there radioing the Germans all about the tanks, and then he'll start for home!"

"There's one way to outwit him." It was the major's cold voice.

"You, gentlemen—Riley, Fitz-Carson, Porter, will draw lots. I take off first. He'll go for me. The next man takes off, hoping to get into the air before he can wing you. Then the third, and so on. Here!"

He broke three matches into different lengths as four men stared at each other stupidly. Then Gordon burst forth:

"Major! It's suicide for you! He'll wing you sure!"

"I have but a little while to live anyhow, and he must be stopped from radioing that information. Stand by, mechanics. Here, gentlemen."

He held out his hand, the matches in his fingers, their lengths hid. Without a word, like men stupefied by some disaster which had stunned them, they drew. Rud gazed down at his match silently. He would follow the major.

The next half minute will never be a vivid memory to him. It was almost a blank. Overhead droned the D.H., tapping out its priceless information. The blond bearcat must be stopped!

Rud was in his ship, the major in his. The mechanics were standing by. Rud jumped as the major's motor burst into full cry. Without an instant of hesitation the major gave it the gun, and the cold motor, sputtering in protest, dragged the ship across the ground on the take-off.

Then it was that the Texan's faculties returned to him. In a trice he had been transformed into the raging young tiger of the air who had won so many a desperate victory. In one vivid second everything seemed to be limned on his mind, never to be erased. Most

deeply etched of all was the major, tall and cool and sheathed in that mental armor which nothing, it seemed, could pierce, holding out those matches to his subordinates just before he hurled himself into the darkness to the certain death of a duck decoyed into the very mouth of the huntsman's gun.

Four silent figures in their cockpits, four mechanics poised at the propellers—and up above a DeHaviland roaring downward to rake the major's craft.

Riley's poised hand dropped. The propeller swung—the motor caught. The mechanic had barely leaped out of the way when the Nieuport was rushing into the darkness. Ahead of the transfigured Riley the major was just leaving the ground, the exhaust pipes of his motor spurting flame. A thousand feet higher the D.H. was swooping downward at an angle across the airdrome, toward Ashcroft's ship, and Rud was hurtling toward the place where the ships would meet.

He eased back on the stick. No, there wasn't flying speed yet. The D.H. was almost close enough for a shot now. It was squarely above Rud, slanting down toward the major. Riley's Nieuport answered his steady hand then, and was rushing along just above the ground. He held it there for a few seconds as the speed

increased. Shaffer was five hundred feet high now.

As the first red spots danced before the mouths of his guns, Rud gave his all. From two hundred feet above the ground he pulled the Nieuport up on its tail. He sighted along his guns. He pressed the gun control. His bullets poured upward—a huge shape hurtled squarely through that aerial barrage!

As the DeHaviland, raked from nose to tail by Riley's fire, faltered, Rud's Nieuport snapped downward. There was nothing he could do, he knew that. He cut the ignition, and then in one motion he shoved the goggles from his eyes, flung his arms before his head, and waited for the crash with limp muscles. The little ship had given its last mile of flying speed in that stall, even as Rud had given his last bit of skill.

Almost as one a Nieuport and a DeHaviland, bearing two pilots, crashed, and two funeral pyres glowed ruddily against the night sky. A second Nieuport, with its live cargo, hit on one wing and the nose, and squashed over on its back just as a tall figure leaped from a scout that was rolling across the ground and tore for the wreck. It was Fitz-Carson who dragged the unconscious Riley from the wreck just before the flames licked greedily at it.

Two hours later the same Fitz-Carson was gazing down at Rud on his cot. A broken leg, two ribs cracked, and a broken shoulder was the toll the wreck had taken.

"Glad to pay you off for the time you kept me from frying," the Englishman stated. "If you're O.K., I'll barge off."

"Do you think he radioed anything——"

"Didn't have time, handling his ship and all, you know. Considerable of a nerve, that Boche, eh, what?"

"And the major?"

For an instant it seemed that even Fitz-Carson felt human emotion. His cold gray eyes were momentarily soft, and when he spoke, pulling at his mustache, his voice was a trifle husky.

"The Heinies fixed it up fine to put on a show for us and start Shaffer off on the right foot. You and the major broke it up a bit, eh? Well, you ought both to be thankful."

"Why?"

Rud was staring at the Englishman curiously. Fitz-Carson seemed to be almost human, right then.

"Well, you've both got a chance to rest, haven't you? The major will never worry again about war and the Phantom Five. He's dead. Toodle-oo."

CHAPTER X

THE BIG GUNS

SOFTLY, like so many giant bats, four airplanes dropped through the darkness. The swish of the idling propellers and the subdued song of the wires as the air stream strummed them was all that broke the silence. To be sure, there was the far-away undertone of the German offensive, but to the war-tuned ears of Rud Riley that was merely a low bass accompaniment to the voice of his ship. The Germans were putting on a real offensive on a fifty-mile front from Arras southward to Le Fere, the last named town being a good fifteen miles north of the square clearing toward which the Phantom Five were gliding.

The lines, from Le Fere south, seemed to be at rest, as though the offensive to the north had sapped all the strength from adjacent sectors. Rud, tooling his two-seated DeHaviland downward with unusual care, wondered again why several things had come to pass. Why had the Phantom Five been ordered to sneak into a clearing, within five miles of the lines, in the

dead of night? Why had the Spads been taken away from the three pursuit pilots whose duty it was to guard the photographic ship which was the heart and soul of the outfit, and two-seaters been assigned to them to fly?

"Well, we'll know soon," he thought philosophically as he jazzed the throttle briefly to clean out the motor. "There is only one tent down there, so we won't stay in this neck of the woods very long."

Riley, like the other pursuit men, was alone in his ship. He followed Bransome, who was the commanding officer's new pilot on the photographic ship, into the field. They were guided by a single winking flashlight, and yet one by one Bransome, Riley, Pudgy Porter, and Fitz-Carson set their DeHavilands down safely and swung toward the flashlight.

As Rud taxied toward the light across the bumpy ground, his eyes picked up several details. In the first place, there was a group of shadowy figures gathered in front of the small tent. A single clump of bushes stood alongside it. In the second place, there was a heap of what looked like bombs, piled neatly in front of the tent. In the third place, there were drums of gasoline.

"Looks almost like a base," he thought with mounting interest.

Despite the fact that for more than three years the four-ship squadron which had become famous all over the world as "The Phantom Five" had performed nothing but perilous special duty on all the fronts, Rud Riley had never lost the full flavor of the thrill of flying. As he climbed out of his ship the lean Texan's blue-gray eyes were lighted by a soft glow, and every line of his bronzed face reflected eager interest.

Gordon, who had succeeded Major Ashcroft as commander of the flight, stood a little in advance of the group of men. There were both officers and mechanics in the crowd, Rud noticed as he came forward.

"Fill every ship with all she'll hold," he heard Gordon order in his deep bass voice. "Then load the bombs."

Obediently the mechanics detached themselves from the group, and started to work in the cool darkness.

"Everybody in the tent," Gordon ordered. "How are the DeHavilands these days, Fitz?"

"Abominable," stated the tall Englishman.

Rud was subconsciously aware that he and lanky Fitz-Carson and fat little Pudgy Porter were the targets for awed glances from the four young officers, who bore wings on their tunics. The Phantom Five pilots were almost invariably objects of admiring curiosity. He was un-

aware, however, that he himself was the eventual target of all eyes as the strangers stood respectfully aside to allow the three pilots to enter the tent first.

He looked the part of the best-known flyer in a group of famous airmen as he walked into the wan light of a single sputtering candle. The lanky, impulsive young redhead, whose flying genius and utter audacity had made him one of the chosen five back in 1914, had been molded and fashioned and welded in the crucible of war—and the product of those teeming years was a rangy, broad-shouldered, lean-faced man of twenty-five whose level eyes spoke volumes. He never thought of himself as the man with the most glorious record of the Phantom Five, nor concededly its best flyer. He would have denied it hotly had it been told him. But he had the poise which results from achievement, and that made him appear as though he were both those things—and he was.

“Well, papa, what are we kiddies going to play with this evening?” piped the irrepressible Pudgy Porter, his pug-nosed face wreathed in a beatific smile.

“We’re bombers,” stated Gordon.

“I say, who are these chaps?” came a bored voice from the rear, and Fitz-Carson was to be seen gazing vapidly at the silent youngsters

around him. The lath-like Englishman was pulling at his microscopic mustache, bored to tears as always.

"Our bombers. Forget their names. Consider yourselves introduced, gentlemen, and names can come later."

Riley gazed at them with new interest. If these boys were to share in a foray by the Phantom Five, they became important. Clean-looking youngsters, he thought, sizing them up from the measureless age of a veteran. Americans all, too.

"All right, boys. The situation is this. We're out to knock off this gun that's been doing all the damage in Paris—if and when we can find it," Gordon said harshly.

A sort of sigh seemed to escape every man in the little tent.

"Whether you all know about the details or not, I don't know," Gordon went on. "But the mission is a thousand times as important as the bagging of the gun in itself would seem to indicate. In the first place, the German lines being sixty-two miles from Paris at their closest point, a gun dropping shells into the city is tough on morale. Paris is in a panic. No one can help but think in terms of superstitious awe and fear of what may happen next when shells

are dropping in your back yard sixty miles from the lines.

"In the next place, this new invention, or whatever it is, is really creating havoc in Paris. A little more than a week ago the Heinies dropped a nine-inch shell in St. Gervais Church during Good Friday service and killed seventy-five people and wounded ninety more. The morale of the French people is lower than it has been since the war started.

"French flyers, crazy to do something to stop this gun, have thrown all caution to the winds and finally have satisfied themselves that they have half isolated the battery. G.H.Q. is sure that the shells are coming from a point somewhere within a radius of fifteen miles of the Forest of St. Goboin, near Loon. The flyers have taken pictures of that sector, and two things seem to back the location. One is the calculations of artillery officers. The second is that a couple of airmen saw, they think, a huge gun fire once from the forest itself. And the shell goes seventy-five miles. Here's a mosaic of the terrain."

"Good gosh! Sure isn't any popgun," stated Pudgy Porter.

"There are several spots which'll bear close scrutiny when we go over," Gordon went on.

"I'll point them out later. Here's the plan. Loon, as you know, is an important railroad center for the Germans. A large number of Allied planes will go over in mass formation at dawn, bomb Loon, and draw German aircraft to its defense.

"We will start from here, tanks full of gas, slip over as fast as possible, and cruise around until one of three things happens. We find the guns and bomb them; our gas supply runs low, or we get knocked down. The guns are there, somewhere."

The young bombers were tense and white-faced as Gordon's words, like so many death warrants, seemed to hang in the air. Rud felt his muscles tense a little, and his throat seemed suddenly dry.

"Those are our orders. Find those guns if possible, and bomb them, and don't allow ourselves to get chased off unless the mission is performed. It's a practical certainty that they're in the forest itself. We'd gladly trade any number of ships and men for those guns."

His dark eyes flickered over the silent group before him. Then he ran his hand through the mop of coarse black hair which was always in wild disarray, and his thick lips twisted in a crooked little smile.

"The attack on Loon may give us a free hand

for a while," he said, "and the whole idea is a quick, fast, and furious rush across the lines. We're based up here just to minimize any possible chances of forced landings before we reach our objective. Lots can happen in thirty miles. This business of full gas tanks makes me laugh, though——"

He ceased talking as though someone had clapped a hand over his mouth. At the same instant, it seemed, Rud and the other airmen stiffened, and for a few seconds there was strained silence.

"A ship!" roared Bransome.

"Then it's a German!" Gordon added.

As though all had been propelled by a single spring, the flyers moved. They tumbled out of the tent, eyes strained upward.

"Coming over the lines," Rud drawled in low tones to Fitz-Carson, but his voice was vibrant with excitement.

"And alone," Gordon rumbled. "If the Boche knows we're here, we're sunk!"

Little pin pricks of light from the strange ship's exhaust pipes were distinctly visible to Riley's eyes, now. The airman was not more than fifteen hundred feet high, and traveling fast.

"Maybe one of those trick challenges!" Porter suggested, his voice cracking slightly.

"Challenges? What do you mean?"

The question came from one of the bombers—the first word one of them had uttered.

"Every day or so one of the Heine circuses sends us over a challenge to fight it out," Porter said absently.

"Why—why don't you?" stammered another of the youngsters.

It was as though the suspense of waiting for that probable carrier of trouble which was roaring toward them had jolted him into speech.

"Our business is to get home with the dope," Rud advised him in his softly slurred Texas speech. "We run from fights when we can——"

"If they knew we were in this forsaken place, they'd send more than one ship, and lay plenty of eggs on us, what?" Fitz-Carson suggested. "Dashed if I can understand this blighter."

The ship, a shadowy spot in the sky, was squarely over the little field. The airmen waited silently. As Gordon had said, the jig was up for the Phantom Five if the enemy knew they were there.

"Good heavens! That's a parachute!"

It was a yelp from Porter. Rud himself had seen a patch of white splotch the starless darkness of the sky and now he picked it up again.

"A spy! Warm up a ship! Rud, go up and

cover that man with your guns wherever he lands!"

The mechanic sprang into action as Rud started for his ship.

"You're balmy, old boy," Fitz-Carson said calmly, as though asking for a cup of tea. "They don't drop spies at the front lines——"

"The ship's coming down out of control. He was alone!" roared Bransome. "Look at her!"

And it was true. As Rud taxied swiftly up the field he could see the ship, its exhaust pipes shooting flame, spinning slowly downward. For the moment it seemed that he was seeing visions. Why should a lone German fly across the lines at two thousand feet at three o'clock in the morning, and leave his ship by way of parachute? A spy would be flown over by another pilot, very high, dropped a long way back of the lines.

He shoved the throttle all the way forward, and the great motor roared into life. The jumper was but five hundred feet high now, squarely over the field. In a few seconds Rud was easing back on the stick, and the DeHavilland took the air.

He banked around the field as he saw that his quarry would inevitably land on it. He didn't need altitude—all that was necessary was the threat of the machine guns. Who would have

thought he'd land squarely at the feet, so to speak, of the Phantom Five?

At that moment the riderless plane crashed in a shell hole a half mile from the temporary airdrome.

"Sure came down slow and easy like," Rud thought.

The plane had slipped and fluttered down and had hit the ground on one wing, so gently that it did not even catch fire. He forgot it for the moment, though, as he saw the jumper land, a hundred feet from the tent. Rud threw his ship in a vertical bank and roared across the lone visitor.

A moment later his services were unnecessary. The man was walking forward to meet a delegation from the Allied airmen, and his hands were in the air.

Despite the fact that having a ship in the air was not the wisest of things to do, owing to the proximity of the German lines, Rud took the time to swoop down over the wrecked plane. It was a single-seated Fokker, and no human being was in sight.

"Which is what I call the height of foolishness," Rud thought with mounting wonder. "Maybe the pilot is cockeyed."

His guess, however, was far from the truth. When he entered the tent, which was sur-

rounded by agitated mechanics and four astounded young bombers, he found a small, fox-faced little fellow in the uniform of the German Air Service, confronting Gordon on steady legs and with his bright little eyes shifting constantly from face to face. He was scarcely over twenty.

"Well, it's the truth, sir, whether you believe it or not," he was saying in perfect English.

"What is?" drawled Rud.

"Says he's a deserter," Gordon said harshly. "He was going to land on an airdrome, and just stole a parachute to play safe if his motor cut out."

"Did it?" Rud asked absently, studying the little fellow whose eyes refused to meet his own.

"No. Control wire broke," snapped Gordon.

Rud leaned over and whispered to his commanding officer.

"Sure. Tell Sergeant Reeves to do it right away," grunted Gordon, his black eyes resting steadily on the twitching prisoner. A brief order to the grizzled sergeant, and Reeves was hot-footing it off through the darkness.

For a moment there was silence, but it appeared that the German could not stand it.

"I tell you I was born in Minnesota, never wanted to fight on the German side, and waited until I got my flying training to steal a ship,

get over, get to be a prisoner, and maybe make arrangements to do intelligence work for the United States!" he whined.

His thin face was beaded with perspiration, and his Adam's apple was going up and down his scrawny neck like a monkey on a stick. His light gray eyes had the pleading look of a dog in them, as he shrank instinctively as Gordon leaned forward toward him. Gordon's bulldog jaw was outthrust, and all the menacing things which might be overhanging the success of their mission were back of the determined expression on his face.

"Personally I'm as sure that you're a spy as I am that I'm standing here," he snarled.

"But why would I do what I did? Come over alone!"

"I don't know yet, and it isn't my business right now to decide that. But I need information. And whoever or whatever you are, I'm going to get it from you!"

He stared balefully at the German for a full half minute, without a word being spoken. Riley's mind was working like lightning. If by any chance the little Heine was not telling the truth, it meant that the Germans were up to strange and unusual stratagems—such as their big guns, for instance.

"That's easy—I want to give it to you," said

the German, with a momentary flash of impudence.

"Oh, yes?"

"As a matter of fact," Pudgy Porter said, "if he was making a lone raid to shoot somebody up, he wouldn't have come over low."

"And if he was to be dropped as a spy he wouldn't have come alone," Rud put in. "It's a single-seated ship, and there was nobody but him in it."

Gordon stood there thoughtfully. There was nothing unusual in his subordinates taking it upon themselves to put in their oar under circumstances like these. Gordon had served too long with them as a supposed lieutenant, and the Phantom Five had been through too much together, to permit of Gordon's being conscious of his rank. It had taken two years for Rud to find out that the gruff secret service man was a good egg.

"Be that as it may," Gordon said, "you'll be shot as a spy unless you come through with the information I want. Where is the gun, or guns, that shoot seventy-five miles or more and have got Paris chasing its own tail?"

"That's easy. Fifteen miles due west of St. Goboin woods, hidden by a well camouflaged concrete building that couldn't be found in a month."

It was hard to think of the prisoner as a German at all. He talked easily in the slangy vernacular of an American city street. He glanced around the silent circle as he said that, and there was a curious craftiness in his face which hit Rud for the first time.

"Sergeant Reeves, sir."

The leathery old sergeant made his way through the group, and whispered to Rud. An instant later the Texan had straightened to his full six feet.

"The wreck wasn't a bad one, and Reeves says there isn't a control wire in the ship that isn't perfect!" he said very slowly.

"Tough break for Fritz!" barked Porter, and a sort of sigh escaped the waiting airmen.

"W-well, she was out of control for some reason," stammered the captive, his face whitening. "I——"

"Never mind," Gordon interrupted, and the next second, like a magician proudly displaying some trick, he had produced the mosaic of the district around the wood—which it had cost ten lives to secure.

"Where?" he snapped.

The prisoner's receding jaw dropped. That mosaic might have been his death warrant, Rud thought, the way he took it.

"Probably is, at that!" Rud concluded.

For a moment every eye was focused on the beautifully put together mosaic. Fifteen miles due west of the woods, he had said——

"Seems to be the remnants of a nice town there," Gordon said with relish, his eyes suddenly like gimlets. "And listen, Fritz. As it stands, you're sunk. You'll be shot as a spy unless you enable us to destroy those guns. Furthermore, you're going to fly over the lines with us, so if you lead us into a trap you'll come down, too. If you get out of the trip alive, and we haven't laid some hundred-pound eggs right on those guns, you'll be shot anyway."

"And so you'd better give us the dope," Rud said softly.

For a moment the little prisoner hung his head. All at once he became a pitiful figure. Rud forgot him, though, in that interval of silence. His mind was racing far ahead. Somehow a dark cloud of menace seemed hanging above the flight, and he could fairly feel it settling down to engulf them. And yet, had the Germans known the location of the Phantom Five, they could have swooped over the lines in force to destroy them.

"All right—you've got me!"

The prisoner had thrown back his head, and

was facing them all with small glittering eyes. His throat worked convulsively as he went on in a rush of words.

"I was caught in Germany, and if I've got to fight at all I'd rather fight on your side. Otherwise you could shoot and be hanged!"

That last sentence was almost ludicrous, its note of lofty defiance, scarcely matching the weak, cunning cast of the German's face, and yet there was dignity in him, too.

"We got word that you fellows were sneaking to the front, and we figured this was our chance to do two things—knock you off once and for all, and find out for sure whether the Allies had spotted our guns or not.

"I was picked for the job to pose as a deserter, convince you of my sincerity by giving you information which was really false, and sending you over to the spot I mentioned to prove I was right. Right there you'd have found a fake wooden gun, all camouflaged up. That was in case any of you should happen to come back alive—sort of protection for me. You'd have seen a gun. But it wasn't planned that you'd come back alive."

"And you never figured on being taken into your own trap, eh?" It was Gordon who asked that question, but Rud interrupted himself.

"Good Lord, they knew we were coming here! Why, their spies must——"

"Know plenty, eh? They do. And let me give you another tip," the German put in eagerly, as though in a hurry to curry favor. "You have been challenged by Von Koren's circus, and my outfit, and others, haven't you, for a sporty duel? Well, listen. Don't ever get ambitious. Not one of those defys was ever made without preparations to have a dozen reserve ships hiding high up to pounce on you. It wouldn't be even. You'd be shot down like so many ducks."

"Think we're crazy?" Gordon inquired oratorically.

"No, but you're running us crazy."

"We're not interested in that right now," Gordon cut in, his bushy eyebrows drawn down in a scowl of concentration. "Now where are those guns—and remember you're going over with us!"

The young German-American took a step forward, his eyes on the mosaic which Gordon was holding in his hand. The four young bombers, Rud noticed, looked white and drawn.

"One of the guns exploded a while ago and killed ten men," the prisoner said quietly. "Its concrete base was pretty well blown up, and it

left a sort of white-looking spot that might be a shell crater. This is it, on your map."

Every eye followed his pointing finger. Sure enough, there was a tiny patch in the middle of the wood which showed up almost startlingly white on the film.

"The other two are within fifty yards of this, on a straight line to the south. Knowing that, you can pick them up when you get over."

"You remember what I told you?"

Suddenly Gordon's voice was loud and harsh, and there was something terrible in his eyes as he fairly shouted at the German:

"You get shot if what you say isn't true. You go down with us if it's a trap. Do you mean to stand there and tell me that the German flyers won't be on the alert close to the guns themselves?"

"My job was to see to it, by hook or crook, that you got to the fake gun," was the stubborn answer. "There's a concentration of anti-aircraft guns around 'em, but there'll be no special aerial guard. If I was going to be led into certain death, why shouldn't I take a gamble and tell you a lie, instead of pointing out exactly where they are?"

For a moment there was tense, thoughtful silence.

"This little egg has plenty of nerve, taking a duty like this at that," Rud was thinking. Aloud he said suddenly: "I believe he's telling the truth, Gordon!"

Gordon nodded.

"I do myself," he said slowly, "and we've got to take his word for it. It checks up with the French information, too. Bransome, have Reeves fix the back seat of Riley's plane so that two can use it. We leave this field at precisely four-fifteen. Here are the bombing assignments."

In a few seconds he had clocked off the names of the men who would fly in each ship. Riley's bomber was Thomas, a slim, blond youngster whose freckled face was a trifle white, but whose deep blue eyes shone like stars.

"Glad to know you, Thomas," Rud told him as he shook hands. "Had much experience at this sort of thing?"

The young fellow gulped, as though talking to the famous young veteran of the war was difficult.

"It'll be my first trip over the lines," he stammered, and then went on hastily:

"But I've had a lot of practice, sir, and I'm looking forward to it!"

Rud smiled at him, and that smile held a

world of admiration for the dauntless youngster.

The ensuing forty-five minutes went on leaden feet. The Phantom Five pilots instructed their bombers in the fundamentals of practical aerial strategy while they waited in the darkness. North of them the subdued roar of the fifty-mile offensive had grown louder, with a higher, more menacing note in it. The ships stood on the line like so many monsters crouched to spring.

Promptly at four a new note crept into the voice of the battle. As Rud recognized that low drone north of them it seemed that something tight within him had broken.

"The ships are on their way over to Loon," he said to Pudgy Porter. "Looks as though we were in for a picnic."

"We'll knock 'em silly," Porter chattered confidently.

Young Thomas, sitting on the ground like some silent worshiper of the older men, got to his feet as though further quietude would be impossible.

"We go right away?" he asked breathlessly, his voice cracking with excitement.

"Right, caballero," Rud said with his slow grin. "Now remember! The job is bombing, first and foremost. You'll have a belt on, the

Heine alongside you won't. You've got a pistol. Keep your eye on him. He's probably O.K., being caught with the goods, but you can't tell. If he's got nerve enough to come over as he did, he may have nerve enough to pull something else——"

"Let him try!"

"Attaboy!" chuckled Porter. "Say, he certainly gave us the low-down on what we've done to those Heine airmen's morale, didn't he, Rud? I'll tell you——"

The first motor burst into full cry, and as though it was a signal the other three joined the chorus. Mechanics hunched in the cockpit, their faces visible in the stream of flame from the exhaust pipes, and the four-hundred-horsepower motors fired rhythmically along, as though eager to be gone. Five minutes later Rud was in his cockpit, his eyes searching the instrument board as he tried the ignition on each switch separately, and checked up his pressure gauges. He turned around, his level eyes glowing warmly through his goggles.

"Give 'em plenty, kid!"

The drawn-faced Thomas nodded. The little German, sitting like a statue alongside him, did not change expression.

Dawn was streaking the eastern sky as they roared over the lines a thousand feet high.

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Rud took one look north through his powerful glasses. What seemed like dozens of specks were whirling crazily in the sky like particles of dust blown by a freaky wind. The air battle over Loon was on.

Ceaselessly Rud searched the sky. At ten thousand feet or so, a solid ceiling of gray mist looked as though about to discharge an April rain at any moment. There was only thirteen miles to go, and not a ship in sight yet. The Loon attack might be successful in drawing a real concentration of German aircraft, at that.

There was the forest, four miles ahead! Twenty-five hundred feet high now, and the airspeed meter was showing a hundred and fifteen miles an hour. Rud, every nerve in him tingling, glanced down at his careful sketch of the forest. He'd hit the exact spot without delay, he was sure. A hundred yards ahead of him Gordon had started a very gradual power dive.

Rud followed him, and the airspeed meter crept to a hundred and fifty miles an hour.

Without warning the DeHaviland ahead of him swooped upward in a chandelle, ending up faced back toward the lines. Rud's head turned as though jerked around by a string. The picture that met his eyes stunned him. At least nine Fokkers were diving like mad on

the tails of the Phantom Five. The other two ships were turning now——

But all that was merely a grisly background for what he saw in his own ship. Thomas, his white face contorted with mental agony, was standing up, his hands bound. And standing beside him, leaning against the air blast, was the German, Thomas' gun in his hand, leaning forward to poke its muzzle into Riley's back.

He cut the throttle in the rear seat, and his crafty face was flushed and his little eyes glinting like diamonds. He pointed downward and to the left as he shouted:

"Dive, or I'll drill you and fly it myself!"

Riley had turned into a raging demon of the air whose mind worked with superhuman swiftness. Instantaneously he comprehended the German's plan. The whole thing was a trap, probably baited with the real guns, and the German pilots would instantly realize the significance of two passengers, plus an Allied plane, leaving the fight, pointed back toward Germany.

And there was nothing else he could do. Tears of helpless fury were in his eyes and his body seemed afire. Back of him three cumbersome DeHavilands were fighting hopeless battles for their lives—and he was forced to run away with a gun in his back.

Rud was cursing Thomas, cursing fate. A kid, paralyzed with excitement, an easy prey for the German!

Suddenly a calm seemed to roll over him and he rose from madness to a coolness which was not human enough for the moment to permit fear. Thomas still wore his safety belt.

He never even looked around. He could feel the gun pressed into his back, and he knew that the German's face was close to his neck. Both men were still standing——

His arms and legs moved with the speed of chain lightning. Back flashed the stick, forward swept the right side of the rudder bar. Out of the speed of the dive came the flash-like maneuver of the ship—up and over on its back, twelve hundred feet above the ground.

For an eternity he waited for the bullet, stick all the way forward to keep the ship on its back, and then he turned as the vibrating De-Haviland swept out of the upside down position. Thomas was alone in the rear cockpit, unfastening his bonds.

Rud, fighting his strained ship, brought it level five hundred feet from the ground. It seemed as though the tail surfaces or wings would snap, but they didn't. Back of him one ship was down, and two Fokkers. Another was spiraling down, but his duty lay ahead.

He was streaking for the forest, climbing gradually. Rud turned to Thomas and signaled. He did not even look behind him. Straight as a string for that white hole in the ground he went.

In the next five seconds Thomas justified himself. A hail of bullets seemed to belch from the ground as camouflaged batteries went into action. Rud, looking down over the side from eight hundred feet, saw four bombs leave the ship in quick rotation, a graceful arc which ended with them apparently speeding along parallel to the ground.

Then he yelled. Those four bombs dropped and exploded in a straight line due south from the white shell hole, at thirty-yard intervals. And camouflaged canvas ripped away, and metal, and bodies were hurtling through the air, emerging grotesquely from the cloud of smoke and dust. A brief glimpse of a monster gun, knocked off its base in a crumpled mountain of metal, and he was clear of the forest and turning toward the lines.

One DeHaviland was fluttering downward. He didn't have a Chinaman's chance to sneak over the lines. Then his eyes froze to a Fokker half a mile ahead of him. Any second the victorious Fokkers still in the air would be down to have a look at him. But that ship on the

ground had landed safely, and its propeller was still whirling. Men were running toward the various wrecks, strewn for a distance of four miles, but as yet none were near that apparently untouched Fokker. It had landed in a huge depression, three hundred yards or so long and ten feet deep. Some freak of artillery fire might have dug it, or perhaps it had been deliberately constructed for some mysterious reason.

The Fokkers were speeding toward him now. And he had destroyed their gun.

In a flash he had nosed down, motor full on. The German pilot was slumped in his cockpit.

"Shot—kept conscious long enough to bring down his ship!" Rud thought.

Bullets ripped through his right wing. He threw his ship into a sort of falling leaf as a thousand desperate expedients shot through his overwrought mind.

He warned Thomas just before he deliberately crashed his ship, side-slipping it into the ground with gasoline cut and ignition off. Tearing linen, clanging metal, choking dust!

"Lie still—don't move!" he shouted.

"O.K!" came Thomas' muffled voice from somewhere in the débris.

Around and around them the Fokkers circled. Then, as though satisfied, they winged

their way northward toward the biggest aerial battle of months, over Loon.

"All right?" Rud shouted.

"Yeah."

"Boy, we're going to fly that Fokker home if they give us a chance!"

And fate was kind. The Fokkers were three miles away, climbing, as the Allied airmen rushed toward the scout. An unconscious body was lifted from the cockpit and laid gently on the ground. The Mercedes was idling without a miss. Rud, his eyes pools of flame and his lips thin and twisted, worked like a lunatic. They carried the tail around, and he gasped:

"You'll have to ride the fuselage, my boy, and maybe we can't get off, but we aren't so heavy and we've got a run!"

Thomas seemed to have been shocked into a species of insanity which brooked no fear of anything. He was laughing with half-hysterical excitement as he stretched himself on the short fuselage, hands gripping the cowlings.

A hundred feet from the wreck of the De-Haviland, Rud, with infinitely delicate perception of flying speed and the last ounce of power in his ship, eased it off the ground. He held it there for a second, and then lifted it over the wall of the pit.

There wasn't another Fokker anywhere near him, and he felt in his bones that he would get through.

And get through he did, but it was a miserable pilot who had almost a triumphal passage in a stolen ship across ten miles of German territory. He was thinking of Fitz-Carson and Gordon and Pudgy Porter, and, to a lesser extent of Bransome, who was new to the Phantom Five. Great-hearted gentlemen, and pilots incomparable, every one of them; now they were strewn along the ground somewhere, probably badly wounded or dead.

No sooner had they landed at the airdome, thirty miles back of the lines, than Thomas was saying, before he rolled off:

"I could cut off my arm for letting that Boche get me."

"Don't worry, son," the depressed Rud told him slowly, "it worked out that you destroyed the gun in a left-handed way, by letting that guy fox you. I'd have been in the fight—and lying back somewhere like the rest of the boys."

Congratulations and slaps on the back and official commendation from high sources meant nothing during that lonesome day. But a telephone call that night from the Commanding Officer of the 99th wiped the cloud from his

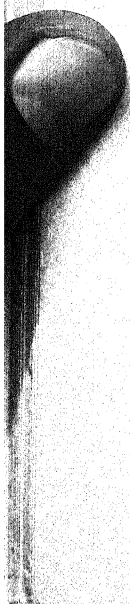
face and the shadows from his eyes as though by magic.

"Heine swooped over and dropped this note. 'Fitz-Carson, Gorden, Bransome, and Porter alive, all wounded but not dangerously. And the Stedal Circus has drunk a toast to Lieutenant Riley, hoping they meet him again!'"

It was next day when the sole remnant of the Phantom Five stood before the chief of the American Air Service. The Texan's eyes were on the floor, and his face was flushed with embarrassment as he listened to the General's words of praise. But Rud was looking the chief straight in the eye as he concluded:

"And at the end of thirty days' leave which he will take whether he likes it or not, *Major* Rudford Riley will be in command of a special group of American pilots whose aim it will be to follow as closely as may be in the steps of the Phantom Five!"





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